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The last of a great fighting nation made its last stand . . . with a trap baited for something greater than game. . . .

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—And—

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Sure, the teacher was sickly—with a deadly way of teaching school. . . .

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Western—and human habit—is a tough thing to kill. . . .

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TRAIN IN MIAMI—AIR CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

Colt-Larnin'

By BOB YOUNG

LEGEND has it that education came to the Washoe Valley of Nevada on the blade of a bowie and classes started with the crack of a Colt navy six.

Soon after the first theater was established in the Comstock Lode area during the 1860's, two successful miners were attending the night's performance. Not pleased with the actors' efforts, they drew their sixes and bowie knives, demanding that the curtain be rung down.

When the command was not immediately obeyed they jumped to the stage, scattering the cast before them. The curtain was lowered and they attacked it with their bowies, ripping it to shreds. Then they went to work on the sets and the scenery. Soon the place was a shambles.

Sober and repentant the next morning, the two men publicly apologized for their bowie demonstration and donated $1000 to a city account for the benefit of a common school. The so-called "Rowdy Fund" was enhanced by other means, and arrangements were made for hiring the first teacher.

Harry Floty, a university man from the States who'd failed in a mining venture, was selected as the teacher to brave the perils of his school "children." Pale and wan, Floty was slightly built, and he was repeatedly warned against taking the position.

"It'll take more than book-larning, Floty, to teach the Washoe boys," he was warned by the president of the newly organized school board. "Boothills are filled with teachers that weren't bigger than their students. And they grow 'em big hereabouts."

(Please turn to page 8)

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BOB YOUNG

(Continued from page 6)

"Give me a chance," Floty pleaded. "I may look like a weakling, but I think I can handle the boys. School will open next Monday morning at nine, if you give me the okay."

The board agreed reluctantly.

Floty was walking towards the schoolhouse the next Monday morning at eight o'clock, the key in one hand and a valise in the other. Sullenly the lads watched him enter.

Someone jeered: "See that! He brought along his suitcase just in case we are so tough he has to leave in a hurry."

At Florty's call, the boys straggled into the room. They watched him unpack three Colt navy guns and a bowie knife, which he stropped on his boot top. Floty turned to the biggest youth among the pupils, obviously the leader.

"Ring the bell, boy, and we'll start classes," Floty ordered as he cocked one of the guns. The lad obeyed.

When students were assigned, and classes started, some one whispered.

Floty leaned over towards the class, two of his guns appearing in his hands magically. "Don't do that again," he said menacingly.

Recess was declared. The yard buzzed with talk about the new teacher. He was a real chief in the Washoe! A teacher who was a gun-toter!

The boys tired of the idle chatter and began playing ball. As one threw the ball into the air, they heard the sharp crack of the navy Colt and watched the ball jump crazily in the air as it was punctured again and again.

When they retrieved the ball—a sad looking tattered object—the boys looked with added respect at the teacher. They filed quietly into school when recess was over.

Education had come to Washoe.

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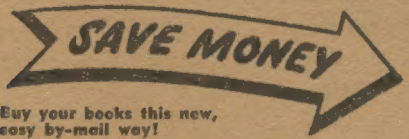

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• • HIRED GUN! • •

CHAPTER ONE

Coffin for a Live Man

LIGE TAYLOR stood on the depot platform with his bedroll and sacked saddle at his feet and watched the train that had dropped him at Sagebrush, Montana, pull out.

Lige was twenty-seven years old, five feet eight, with good shoulders and lean flanks, his saddle-muscled legs a little bowed. His hair was black and wiry, his blue eyes were set under black brows. He wore a Stetson hat, shop-made shoes, new flannel shirt and a pair of buckskin-foxed plaid wool Oregon pants. The best clothes he owned were on his back, all his worldly goods at his feet—and he had a lone silver dollar in his pocket.

He was a stranger in a strange land and his grin was bitter as he watched

It was a rough-and-tumble battle, no holds barred

A Quick Trigger Novel by WALT COBURN

Trapper Del had a knife in his right hand

the departing train and listened to the locomotive's mournful wail. The raw spring wind almost blew his hat away and he yanked it down on his head.

"Left somethin' on that eastbound?" sounded a voice behind him. It belonged to a man who wore a railroad conductor's cap with a metal station agent's badge pinned on it at a jaunty angle.

Lige grinned at the spectacled little man and shook his head. "I got nothin' to

Lige Taylor tied into a strange and deadly crew when he hired out to the Amazon boss of Hog Ranch: Big Liz, who fought like a woman and died like a man . . . doomed Sam Crutchfield, who was ticketed for hell, yet lived murderously on . . . But the strangest was Trapper Del—who fought through fire to crawl into his own oversized coffin!

leave behind, mister. Not a damn' thing."

"That's a hell of a way for a big strappin' young feller like you to be talkin'. Lookin' fer a job?"

"I could use one." Lige said.

"Every cowman in this part of the country's in town," the man in the railroad hat said. "You'll find 'em over at the courthouse where they're tryin' Sam Crutchfield fer murder. First day of the trial and the bettin's ten to one it'll be a hangin' verdict. Whole town and the bulk of the country folks are tryin' to pack theirselves into the courtroom. You kin put your bed and saddle in the baggage room till you need 'em." He jerked a thumb towards a black coffin with nickel-plated handles that sat on the baggage rack.

"You might 'tend to an errand fer me while you're over at the courthouse. Tell Liz she's got an express box over here." A grin spread across the station agent's face.

It was the biggest coffin Lige had ever seen. Shiny black and at least eight feet long.

"How will I know this Liz lady?" Lige asked.

"Ask anybody to point her out fer you. Liz, from the Hog Ranch. Hell, she's like as not settin' there alongside Sam Cruchfield, with Dusty Kinkaid a-settin' right beside her." The little man shivered. "I'm gittin' in outa this damn wind," he said. "Throw your outfit on the truck an' help me shove 'er in."

Lige Taylor loaded his bed and the big sack that held his saddle, blanket, bridle and chaps on the truck and wheeled it into the baggage room, then headed for the courthouse.

There were men standing around outside talking in small groups and Lige sensed the air of hostility as they looked him over. Some of them were older cowmen and some common cowhands in town for the trial, gathered in their own groups where a bottle was being passed around. The town folks had come out of morbid curiosity. The women were mostly percentage girls who worked in the honky-tonk on the other side of the tracks and Lige could see their ostrich plumed hats through the doorway when he stepped into the courtroom.

Lige looked at the judge and the men in the jury box, then fixed his stare on the tall, lean, tow-headed man who sat in the witness chair. There was a snarl on his face and he had the look of a trapped animal. There was no doubting his identity. He was the accused, Sam Crutchfield. He had handcuffs on his wrists. A big paunchy man with a law badge pinned to his open vest stood alongside the prisoner.

Sam Crutchfield was clean-shaven, his hair freshly cut. Handsome in a lean-jawed, hawk-beaked, thin-lipped way. His cold pale green eyes looked hard and defiant and a little contemptuous. He sat stiff-backed, legs braced against the chair, his handcuffed wrists between his legs and his fists knotted. A cowlick stood up like a fighting crest on top of his head. He looked mean and dangerous.

THE judge wore a rusty spotted black frock coat and a soiled white shirt. Gray-haired, gray-faced, he had neglected to shave that morning and even from the back of the courtroom Lige could see the sparse gray bristles on his face. He viewed the jury and the prisoner and the courtroom with a jaundiced eye and his gavel pounded loudly.

"Order in the court, hear me!" He had a rasping voice. The muttering died down.

"Old Deefy's a-goin' to throw that damn book at Sam, shore as hell." The voice was a stage whisper that filled the hushed courtroom louder than a scream.

The judge leaned forward, a hand cupping one ear. He must have been deaf not to hear it. But he heard the murmur

that followed and saw the grins on the faces of the men and women. His gray face purpled and his gavel pounded. "Silence, or I'll clear the courtroom!"

The prisoner got to his feet as the silence fell. He shook off the restraining arm of the law and broke the silence in a hard, flat-toned voice.

"I got no money to waste on some shyster lawyer. I stand accused of murder. I killed a man named Tom Sykes. He needed killin'. I give him an even break for his gun and gutshot him and watched him die because it give me pleasure. I didn't know till after he was dead that he had a law badge pinned to his undershirt, but it wouldn't a made any difference. The law says that a man can't be hung if he pleads guilty. And by the hell I'm a-holdin' you to that. I'm guilty as hell!" Nobody moved and the breathing in the courtroom was audible. The prisoner grinned flatly, thin lips bared away from strong white teeth, as he looked at the gray-faced judge.

The judge cleared his throat. He hawked and spat a stream of tobacco juice into the big brass cuspidor alongside him. His face was livid.

"Let the prisoner stand there on his feet, Sheriff. I sentence you, Sam Crutchfield, to ninety-nine years at hard labor in prison. I hope you rot and die there. And may the Devil in Hell have mercy on your soul." His voice shook and he clutched the handle of the gavel as a man would clutch a weapon.

"You got what you asked for, Sam!"

A brittle voice sounded so close to Lige that he stiffened and looked down at a girl standing alongside him. Her head came to the level of his shoulder. She had hair the color of new copper, plaited in two squaw braids coiled and fastened at the nape of her neck. Her eyes were slate gray, the color of dust powdered sagebrush, hard and bright with anger and hatred under thick black brows. Lips that curled back from white teeth. She wore a flannel shirt and buckskin jacket and faded levi overalls and boots. Her Stetson hat was gripped in her hands. She was slim as a growing boy.

"Get her outa here, Liz!" Sam Crutchfield's voice was flat-toned. "I told you to keep her away! Git her outa this stinkin' hole, Liz!"

Lige did not see the big woman until she put her arm around the girl's shoulders. Then she filled the eye. A big, powerfully-built woman with thick coarse hair bleached yellow under the ostrich plumed hat that was askew. The rouge on her leathery cheeks looked like it had been daubed on in the dark and her mouth was smeared till it looked like a crimson slash across her face. In spite of her garish drug-store make-up she was a handsome woman. She was dressed in bright green silk that rustled.

"Hush, Dusty. Git a tailholt on yourself, baby." She gathered the girl in her arms protectively. She looked as though she could handle any man that dare touch the girl she held in her arms. But her voice was soft, soothing, like a man's voice is when he's handling a green bronk. Her hard green eyes cut a swift look all around. Then she was looking straight into Lige Taylor's eyes with desperate appeal.

"Help me git her outa this place before Deefy gits his second wind and throws the book at us." Her voice was low-toned, grim.

TAYLOR grinned and nodded. He cut a look at the prisoner and there was murder in his eyes as he stared at Lige. A low mutter followed in his wake as he shoved and shouldered his way roughly through the crowd of men. When they cleared the crowd the big woman and the girl came up alongside and they walked that way in silence until they were out of sight and earshot of the courthouse. The big woman still had a protective arm

around the girl's slim shoulders. She halted and held out a large strong hand. Even outside she reeked of honeysuckle perfume.

"You're a white man, mister. If ever you come out to the Hog Ranch, I'll make you shore welcome. Just ask fer Liz. This young 'un is Dusty Kinkaid. Her old man is blind and she runs his horse outfit for him. They're neighbors of mine. She was bound to come to town.

"Sam's place is down on the Missouri River below the Kinkaid horse outfit. Sam killed a man because he was pestering Dusty. Sam has a bad rep and the law jumped at the chance to railroad him. Give a dog a bad name and he's bound to git picked up by the dog ketcher, or shot."

Liz tightened her arm around the girl's shoulders as she took Lige's hand and gripped it hard. "We ain't wimmin that goes around sobbin' out their troubles, mister. I just wanted to warn you now that the folks around here ain't goin' to thank you for what you done for us just now. It looks like that warnin' come too late and I'm sorry." She pulled the hatpins out and held her hat in her hand.

"Forget it, ma'am. It was an honor and a pleasure. You wouldn't be shorthanded out at your place? I'm lookin' for a job. Punchin' cows. Ridin' bronks." Lige grinned faintly. "Or even diggin' post holes. It don't look like any of the cowmen I saw would hire me. I'm down to my last dollar."

"You're hired. You got a horse?" Liz asked.

"I come by train. My outfit's over at the station." said Lige.

"You kin ride the horse Sam Crutchfield left in the barn. I'll load your bed on my buckboard. I'm sendin' you down to take care of Sam's place."

Lige Taylor remembered about the message he was to deliver to Liz. "The station agent said to tell you he had an express box for you. You know about it?"

Liz nodded. "The coffin I ordered for Trapper Del. I had to have it made special. His seven foot carcass won't fit into one of them six foot coffins them undertakers keep in stock without we'd saw off both his legs. Too bad the Trapper ain't in town. He could try this'un on fer fit.

Liz smiled a little. "Trapper Del's kinda locoed. He's trapped too many varmints. Claims they'll dig his carcass up and scatter the bones from hell to breakfast. I told him I'd be tickled to foot the bill if there was any hopes of him dyin' off quick." She smiled grimly.

"If you hear somebody prowlin' around your cabin of a night, holler before you shoot. Like as not it'll be that locoed Trapper. Don't kill him unless you have to, mister. I don't know your name."

"Lige, Lige Taylor. From New Mexico."

Lige looked at the girl. The color had come back into her face. She shrugged off the older woman's arm and faced Lige. They had reached the barn. She pulled a roll of money from her pocket and held it in her hand, then shoved it at Lige.

"You did too much for us already," she said. "Don't go down to the Crutchfield place or have anything to do with us. We're bad luck. Here's the money Liz dug up to give Sam Crutchfield for a South American stake. But he wouldn't leave the country. Take what you want out of it and fork Sam's horse away from these parts. You saw what happened to Sam Crutchfield. It's what will happen to you if you pick it up where he left off. You'll be bushwhacked by Trapper Del or railroaded to prison by Judge Deefy. You can't win for losing when you throw in with this outfit. Take this and quit the flats!"

WHEN SHE tried to shove the money into his hand Lige shook his head. She turned to the big woman who was

looking at her like she would look at a spoiled brat speaking out of turn.

"Tell him to take the money, Liz, and quit the country before it's too late."

"The stranger's welcome to that bankroll. But I'll gamble he won't take it. He won't pull out, now that he's got a good look at you, Dusty," Liz said.

A slow flush crept into the girl's face. Then her eyes hardened. "That's mighty cheap talk, Liz. But you make it sound big. You're using me for bait. Bait to set a man trap. It makes no difference to you if a stranger named Taylor from New Mexico gets killed." The girl's face had paled again. She threw the roll of bank notes bound by a wide rubber band on the ground at the woman's feet.

Lige saw Liz's face whiten. It was as if this slim girl had slapped a quirt across it. A stricken look came into her eyes, and then was gone. She forced a smile when she looked from the girl and met Lige's puzzled frown.

"Dusty's dead right about the big odds stacked against you, mister," said Liz. "But we'll try to whittle down the odds and somehow, someway, get the right men on our side.

"You're going into this blindfolded. Right now all I kin promise you is bad trouble. But the stakes are high if we win out. As far as Lige Taylor and Dusty Kinkaid are concerned, that's strictly up to you both.

"This Hog Ranch of mine is nothin' but a stage station and saloon. I got the mail and Wells Fargo express contract that nobody can take away. It's called the Hog Ranch because there used to be women out here, but I got rid of them. It's still a tough place and I run it like a man would run it. You'll be told that Hog Ranch Liz is a tough character. A hard case. I never took the trouble to deny it." She bent over and picked up the roll of money and blew the dust off it.

"Whew!" she said. "I got old ironsides cinched too tight, baby. The torture a woman goes through when she goes to town! I'll be glad when I get out home and cut the latigo strings on old ironsides and get into a Mother Hubbard squaw dress." Liz grinned.

"Dusty claims this is bad money, Lige. Show me any money that's bin in circulation long enough to wear off the new look that ain't tainted? But you can't blame Dusty. She never had no mother she kin remember. I tried to bring her up strict. She growed up amongst men folks and they were tough men. But they knowed how to treat a lady. If they didn't they never lasted long. Tom Sykes got hisself killed that-away." Liz still had the money in her hand. Her eyes were frank and honest as she looked at Lige.

"Right here and now," she said, "is the time to pull outa the game, stranger. You're welcome to any part or all of this roll that I wanted to hand over to Sam for his get-away. Take it and pull out. There'll be no hard feelin's."

"I'll string along with you, lady. Put away that bankroll."

Liz smiled as she tucked the money into a big red patent leather bag.

The barn man had a grain-fed well-matched bay team hooked to a yellow wheeled buckboard. His helper brought out Dusty Kinkaid's saddled horse.

"Fetch out Sam Crutchfield's horse but don't saddle him," Liz told the barn man.

Liz climbed up in the buckboard and took the lines. "Climb aboard, Lige. You kin lead your horse to the station and get your saddle."

THEY started over to the station. Dusty rode behind, silent, almost sulking, a troubled look in her eyes.

The station agent stared at them, a foolish grin on his face.

"Sam got life." Liz said. "Did you bet that hundred the way I told you, Johnny?

Then collect. It wasn't a hangin' verdict. Lige will lend you a hand loadin' Trapper Del's last box. How does it look, Johnny?"

"Too dad-gummed purty to hold that locoed stinkin' thing. You're a fool, throwin' your hard-earned money around thataway, Liz." He looked at Lige, pulling his cap down at a rakish angle. "You hired out to Liz? You couldn't work fer no finer woman on earth, mister. Heart as big as a washtub. H'are you, Dusty?" He pulled off his cap.

"Fine, Johnny, just fine." Dusty smiled. "Put on your cap."

"How's your papa, Dusty?" he asked.

"Same as always, Johnny." Her smile faded. "No better. No worse."

Lige helped him wheel the baggage truck out. They loaded the outsized black coffin and Lige's bedroll on the buckboard. He wanted to throw a wagon sheet over the coffin but Liz shook her head.

"I'm drivin' down the main street. Just to give the citizens of Sagebrush something else to talk about. Too bad you can't be up town, Johnny, to watch their eyes bug out when they see this nice shiny black coffin." Liz laughed.

"If I was man enough, Liz, I'd ask you to marry me," Johnny said.

"Careful or I might take you up on that. So-long for now, Johnny," said Liz.

Lige had his horse saddled and his spurs and chaps on. He swung up into the saddle and rode alongside the buckboard.

Liz pulled an ivory handled six-shooter from her big red patent leather bag and handed it up to Lige. "Here's my gun, Lige, in case you need one."

Lige shoved the gun into the pocket of his old bullhide chaps so that the ivory butt stuck out.

"You make a handsome couple, you two." Liz drove her team down the main street at a trot, handling the lines like an expert.

Dusty looked at Lige and her gray eyes softened. "You didn't laugh at Liz," she said. You didn't find her funny."

"I didn't find nothin' to laugh about," Lige said. "I like her."

Dusty reached her hand out and Lige took it. He felt her grip tighten, and when he looked at her she was blinking tears from her eyes.

"Liz is about all I got to tie to," she said. "Liz and Papa."

"How about Sam Crutchfield?" asked Lige.

The girl's lips stiffened. She made no reply to his question.

"I'd like to know how to go about it," Lige said. "To make you feel like you could depend on me."

"You're doing all right so far, Lige." Her grip tightened. She crowded her horse close and stood in her stirrups and leaned sideways in her saddle and kissed him.

"That," she laughed a little as she straightened up in her saddle, "was for Liz." Her cheeks were flushed a little.

Lige felt his face get red. "Those folks standin' yonder on both sidewalks saw that," he said.

"Then they saw something they never saw before. Dusty Kinkaid kissing a man. It don't bother me, if you don't mind it," Dusty said.

"It makes me feel shore prideful. Like I could lick the world," said Lige.

"Don't go braggin, mister," Dusty smiled. "You're over matching yourself as it is."

LIZ DROVE her team at a pulled-down trot, sitting stiff-backed and high-chinned on the buckboard seat. She had pulled on a long linen duster to cover her best silk dress. A man's Stetson hat was pulled at an angle on her bleached yellow head. Her ostrich-plumed hat was inside a pillow case on the seat. Buckskin gauntlets on her hands. She held a tight rein and had a buggy whip in her hand. The long black shiny coffin was tied on the

buckboard and the yellow wheels were spinning in the dusty street.

The men who lined the wide plank sidewalk on either side of the cow town street, stared, slack-jawed. A tall grizzled cowman took off his hat and bowed stiffly. Liz saluted him with the shiny black buggy whip.

"That's Hank Sands," Dusty told Lige as they rode behind Liz's buckboard. "He owns the SS cow outfit across the Missouri river from the Sam Crutchfield place."

Hank Sands lifted his hat to Dusty as she rode past. His puckered hard blue eyes looked Lige Taylor over with shrewd cow-country appraisal.

A mile from town Liz pulled her team to a halt. It was on a flat where the sagebrush grew tall. She was grinning widely. "Step down, Lige, and hold these horses and look straight ahead. Me'n Dusty is taking to the brush."

They came back a few minutes later. Liz was packing a bright green silk corset rolled up in her glove hand. She shoved it in under the leather seat cushion. "Whew! That's a relief. I couldn't stand it no longer."

Lige let on like he'd never noticed. He wiped away the start of a grin. Liz let go of a hearty laugh and Lige and Dusty laughed with her. Liz took a large silk handkerchief and wiped the rouge off her face and lips. Lige untied his bed rope and got a cartridge belt and holstered wooden handled six-shooter out of his war sack. He handed Liz back the gun that belonged to her.

"I got what you call eyes in the back of my head, Lige." Liz's voice had a grim sound. "You're doin' all right for a green hand."

Lige had his back half turned and was buckling on his cartridge belt. He kept his head lowered when he felt his face redden. When he slid a cautious look from under his hatbrim his glance caught Liz off guard. She had rubbed her face clean and it left a leathery skin with crow's feet lines etched around the corners of her eyes, and the corners of her mouth were deep-bitten. Her eyes were green as old ice, and the expression on her face was bitter, cruel, uncompromising. Lige looked away before she caught him watching her. The expression on her face belied her tone of careless, teasing banter, and it gave Lige something to think about as he walked over to his horse and picked up his bridle reins. He swung up in his saddle as the buckboard got under way, and he was no longer grinning when he looked at Dusty. The girl's slate gray eyes were clouded as they rode along in silence for almost a mile. They dropped behind the cloud of dust made by the buckboard and Liz was lost to view. Lige reached out and took Dusty's hand. It felt cold now in his grip, but she made no move to pull away.

"What's gone wrong, Dusty?" asked Lige.

"I over-played the cards dealt me," Dusty answered. "I should have known better. It isn't often that I let my emotions get the better of the common horse sense that's been drilled into me by Liz and Papa since I can remember. It isn't often that I make a little fool of myself."

"You got me all mixed up, Dusty," Lige told her.

"Because there for awhile I got all mixed up myself, Lige," said Dusty. "Liz gave me enough rope to get me tangled up in the slack. Back yonder at the barn, when Liz tried to play Cupid, I thought she meant it. It turns out I was wrong. Hog Ranch Liz might not have eyes in the back of her head. But she's one of the best poker players in the cow-country. She could have turned her head just enough to watch me kiss you. From then on she was watching us. And she'll watch us from now on, and she'll get Trapper Del to do her watching for her."

THEY WERE riding alongide so close that their stirrups touched, and Dusty was looking at him, her eyes shadowed with dread. "As long as Sam Crutchfield is alive," Dusty spoke in a toneless voice, "even if he's locked up in the Deer Lodge pen, Liz will see to it that Dusty Kinkaid is kept on ice. She'll ride close herd on me to see that I don't make a fool of myself."

"I still don't get the drift," Lige said flatly.

"I keep forgetting that you are a stranger here," Dusty said. "Liz thinks the sun rises and sits on Sam Crutchfield. In her eyes, Sam can do no wrong. Because Sam Crutchfield is Liz's only son."

"I didn't know that," Lige said.

"There's a lot more you don't know." Dusty's grip tightened. "I tried to keep you out of this ugly, dangerous mess. Remember? It's not too late for you to pull out. You better ride away from it. Now."

"I'm in to stay, regardless," Lige answered. "Even if I have to play the game blindfolded."

Lige held the hand she was trying to pull free, until her fingers quit squirming and lay passive in his grip. "Nobody can make me believe that Liz was lying, Dusty." he said.

"Nobody is calling Liz a liar, Lige. She's all the mother I ever had. I owe her a lot. When my mother died, Liz raised me. It's not any feeling of mother love I hold for Liz. You can't love a woman like Hog Ranch Liz. She's tough as rawhide. It's more like a feeling of loyalty. Liz never asked me to marry Sam, but that's what she has in mind. Liz will tell you Sam Crutchfield killed Tom Skyes to keep him from bothering me, because Sam told her that and she will believe anything her son tells her. Sam killed Tom Sykes because he had a law badge pinned to his undershirt, and had uncovered some snake tracks left along Sam's trail. He was trying to serve a bench warrant on Sam when Sam killed him.

"Liz begged Sam to take all the money she could dig up and quit the country till the killing had time to blow over and the dust settle. But he gave himself up. He wanted to be sent to the pen for killing a man he claimed was bothering Dusty Kinkaid. He's got Liz tricked into believing he is some kind of a hero and martyr, and he knows Liz will leave no stone unturned to get him out of prison. Sam thought he had me fooled until I spoke out of turn in the courthouse. He hollered at Liz to get me out of there because he was afraid I'd tell the truth."

"You're slippin' my blindfold, Dusty," said Lige.

"The Vigilantes hung Sam's father for a road agent and killer," Dusty continued. "Sam is a chip off the tough Crutchfield block. Perhaps I'm being disloyal to Liz when I tell you that, but if you're going to be mule-headed and stubborn enough to stay in this game, it's only fair to put you on your guard.

"Until Sam gets out of the pen, Liz needs a man like you she can depend on to hang and rattle, regardless. And she meant it when she told you you'd get a big cut if you lived that long. But she had you fooled when she said Dusty Kinkaid was thrown in for boot. And I reckon she had me talked into believing her."

"I heard Liz say it was up to us." Lige tried to keep his voice steady. "It's up to you, Dusty."

"Yes. Liz passed the buck. We've known each other less than half a day. I like you Lige. I'm willing to trust you. And you like me well enough to risk your life for me because you think I need a friend, and I'd be lying if I denied that I need a friend badly. Let's let it go at that, till further along the trail."

"I know right now," said Lige, "how I feel. Nothing can change that."

"Don't gamble on it, Lige. I'd hate to

let you down at the end." said Dusty.

"All right, let it ride." said Lige. "But I want you to promise me one thing. If you make up your mind, you let me know."

"I'll promise you that, Lige," said Dusty.

"Another thing, before Liz splits us apart. If you need me, come to where I am, or send me word," Lige said.

"I'll do that, Lige." Dusty smiled at him. "The trail forks a few miles from here. Liz is going to send you down alone to the Crutchfield place, then she'll send me to the Red Barn. That's the name of our horse ranch. It may be weeks, months even, before our trails cross, or if your luck runs out, this might be the last time we'll see each other." She reined her horse up.

"I want you to hold me close and kiss me, Lige." Her voice was no more than a whisper.

WHEN HE held her, he felt her lips warm as they moved against his mouth and he could feel her trembling in his arms.

"Be careful, Lige. Come back to me because I need you. I've never felt this way before about any man," Dusty said.

Their lips bruised and tears welled in Dusty's eyes when she pulled away from Lige. His blood was pounding in his throat and his eyes were blinded by the emotion that stirred inside him. Then he heard her pull in her breath and it had the sound of a deep sob. She pointed to where Liz had pulled up about a half mile away. The dust had settled and Liz was turned around watching them. She had a Winchester carbine in a scabbard slung alongside the buckboard seat. Lige and Dusty saw the sun catch the blued steel of the naked barrel. The carbine lay along the back of the seat and Lige knew it was pointed at him. They watched Liz shove the carbine back into its scabbard.

"Half a mile," Lige forced a mirthless grin. "Is too far away. I'm outa gun range." He looked at the girl now.

"You're mine now, Dusty," he said. "No man on earth can take you away from me."

"Yes. I belong to you, Lige. And you belong to me. Nobody can separate us, not even Liz. No man on earth can claim me now," Dusty said.

They rode at a slow trot toward the buckboard. By the time they got there to where the buckboard waited, Liz had a cigarette rolled and lit. Smoke drifted from her mannish grin as she looked at them.

"Yonder's your trail to the Crutchfield place, Lige," Liz said quietly. "I'll send Trapper Del down with your bed. There's plenty grub in the cabin and a string of good cow horses in the pasture. Nothin' much to do until the calf round-up starts next month. You kin work back into the breaks and brand what mavericks you find. Put everything in Sam's Snake Track iron." Liz leaned over and traced the Snake Track brand in the dirt with the butt of the buggy whip.

"In case Trapper Del drops around, pay him no never mind. He's kinda locoed in the head. I'll expect you to get along with him." There was some kind of a threat or warning in her green eyes when she said it.

"You'll draw fightin' wages. That's understood when you hire out to Hog Ranch Liz," she said. "Keep the ears of every maverick you brand for a tally."

Liz continued her instructions. "Don't cross the river unless you're huntin' trouble. That's the Hank Sands SS range and we don't get along too good. The wide Missouri river is our deadline." Liz stubbed out the short butt of her cigarette against the leather carbine scabbard before she added. "Hank Sands' son Frank is stuck on Dusty, so keep him on his own side of the river. I reckon that's all. So-

long, Lige. I think we'll get along."

Dusty held out her hand and Lige gripped it. It felt cold in his.

"Send for me, Dusty, if you ever need me." Lige spoke loud enough for Liz to hear him.

"I might take you up on that, Lige." There was no fear in the girl's voice.

Their hands gripped. Then Lige reined his horse and headed down the trail into the badlands. Before the trail dropped from sight, he turned in his saddle and waved his hat. Dusty waved as she rode along in the dusty wake of the buckboard. Liz had let her team out and the buckboard bounced over the ruts. The sun reflected on the shiny wood of the coffin Liz had made to order for the seven foot body of Trapper Del.

CHAPTER TWO

Beast in Buckskin

IT WAS past sundown when Lige Taylor rode down the long gumbo clay ridge spotted with scrub pines, to the log buildings and pole corrals along the river bottom. Giant cottonwoods grew along the banks and tall willows flanked the river. The muddy water had turned a tawny golden color in the afterglow. A meadowlark sat on a fence post and warbled its evening song. Lige had time to drink in the picturesque beauty of it. He could enjoy it all because the memory of the girl Dusty rode with him. It looked like a cowman's paradise to the man from the desert country of New Mexico.

Lige leaned from his saddle and pulled the wooden pin that held the pole gate shut. He rode through the barbed wire pasture fence and closed the gate. It was not until he rode towards the log barn and pole corrals that he noticed the cattle inside the bigger corral and half a dozen men on horseback. They all wore six-shooters buckled around the middle and two or three packed saddle guns. They were grim-mouthed and their hard eyes sized Lige up as he let his horse come to a halt. They all rode horses branded SS on the left shoulder.

A tall slim-built man with a week's growth of sandy whiskers and squinted blue eyes acted as spokesman. "We was half way expectin' somebody from the Hog Ranch to show up. I reckon you're our man." It was a half question.

"That depends." Lige matched the man's quiet tone.

"We taken it fer granted Sam Crutchfield won't be back for some time. You the man Liz sent down to take over his outfit?"

"That's right, mister. If it ain't too much of a question, who are you?" Lige reached for his tobacco sack and papers.

"I'm Frank Sands. Old Man Hank's pride and joy. I'm ramroddin' the SS. We came acrost the river with a pack outfit to do a little cleanin' up on Sam Crutchfield's Snake Track range. And it looks like we done all right for ourselves on the quick gatherment." He was watching Lige narrowly.

"If it ain't too personal, what name do you go under while you're in these parts?" His wide grin never reached his eyes.

"Lige Taylor. They gave me that name when I was born. I never had cause to change it." Lige forced a grin to match the one on Frank Sands whiskered face.

"Sometimes a man takes too much for granted, Taylor. Mostly, men working for Liz are renegades of some kind. Could be I got you sized up wrong. Time will tell, as the feller says." Frank Sands kept grinning.

"Meanwhile," he continued, "our horses are shore leg-weary and my boys is empty-bellied. Looks like you could use a change of horses and I've no way of knowin' when you 'et last. So let's turn our ponies loose and tie into the grub our cook has ready."

They unsaddled at the barn. Frank Sands asked, "How did Sam Crutchfield make out?"

"He pleaded guilty. The judge gave him ninety-nine years at hard labor," Lige answered.

There was the jingle of horse bells down in the pasture. The horse wrangler was bringing in the remuda.

"Sam Crutchfield ain't the brand artist he claims to be," said Frank Sands as they unsaddled. "A blind man could see how he worked our SS into his Snake Track on the thirty-seven head of cattle we got penned. If Sam was here we'd make him do the job of ventin' the Snake Track and stampin' on our SS brand. Bein' its you, all we'll do is the ropin' and give you a man to tend the fire. All you gotta do is handle the hot irons."

"Am I supposed to feel honored?" Lige asked.

"That depends on how you want to take it. We got you sized up for a sucker, stranger." Frank looked at his cowhands and grinned.

"I didn't know it showed," Lige said.

"You kin take my word for it, Taylor." Frank grinned and led the way to the hot grub the cook had ready.

THEY emptied their tin plates and drank big cups of strong black coffee, and squatted around on their hunkers smoking. Frank Sands' cowhands were quick to catch on and they were treating Lige Taylor like he was one of them.

This Frank Sands was the sort of man Lige liked on sight. His easy way and lazy drawl, his infectious grin and the straightforward look in his blue eyes, all went to make him an easy man to like. But Lige knew that this same good-natured man could be tough as a boot.

"I got orders," said Lige, his belly filled and warmed by the hot strong cof-

"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

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fee, "to run any SS man I find here acrost the wide Missouri."

"We kin save you that bother. Directly you git the brandin' done, we'll go back to our own side of the river, but we're takin' the cattle with us," said Frank Sands.

"If I was over matched," Lige went on, "I was told all I had to do was holler for a gent called Trapper Del."

"You might try hollerin' for the Trapper," said Frank Sands, "but I don't reckon he'll show up until we're acrost the river."

They dumped their emptied dishes into the dishpan. Sandy led the way to the horse corral. It took them till about midnight to finish the branding. They emptied the corral and the thirsty cattle headed for the river. The cowhands let them drink and then crowded them across. They swam their remuda and pack mules across. Frank stayed behind while the cowhands crossed the livestock. He and Lige dismounted and sat in the shadow of a giant cottonwood, smoking in silence.

Frank broke the silence. "It must look to you like we played some kind of a sneakin' trick. Makin' a fast work on this side of the river while there was nobody around to stop us. I'm ramroddin' this shindavvy on my own. But I don't think I'm going to ketch hell from my old man. I don't want to be swappin' hot lead with any of the renegade cowhands that's using the Hog Ranch and the Snake Track ranch for a hideout. My boys are paid to punch cows, and there ain't a gun-slinger in the SS outfit." Frank looked at Lige.

"You ain't over matched now, Taylor, if you feel like takin' it up?"

"I got no notion of takin' it up. Now or later." Lige's face was dirty, sweat-grimed. "I handled the brandin' irons, remember? I know a worked brand when I see one. I don't need no rule book. I'm plumb willing to take the blame if Liz or anyone jumps me." Lige was staring into the other man's eyes. His lips thinned.

"I don't see anything to rassle about," Lige finished.

Both men grinned faintly. Then the grins froze.

"Make a gun move and I'll gut shoot the pair of you conniverin' sons!" The snarl came from behind the high dense red willow thicket behind them. They lifted their hands to the level of their shoulders and dared not move. Frank Sands cut a warning look at Lige as they squatted there.

"You musta come up against the breeze, Trapper." Frank Sands voice lost nothing of its soft drawl. "Otherwise we'd have smelt your stink. Quit coyotin' around and come outa the brush like a man."

"Like hell I will, Frank. Liz told me this Lige Taylor thing is drawin' fightin' pay. I aim to see he earns them big wages. Stand up on your hind laigs!"

"Do as he says, Lige." Frank slid his six-shooter from its holster and tossed it on the ground as they got to their feet. Lige dropped his gun alongside it.

"Walk out onto that sandbar. The two of you is goin' to scrap this out by hand. You better make it a good fight 'er I'm apt to cut your damn laigs out from under you!" Trapper Del told them.

"That locoed son ain't foolin'," Frank said to Lige as they walked out across the wide sandbar. "Put up the best fight you got in you, because I'm goin' to try to whip you."

It was going to be tough on a man standing up and swapping punches with a man you liked. Lige felt a surge of resentment stirring inside his guts. Anger at himself, at the woman called Liz, at Trapper Del, most of all. The faint evening breeze now carried the stench of Trapper Del to him and it clogged his nostrils. The odor of skunk and skinned muskrat and stale sweat. It was a pungent nauseating smell of a man who trapped and skinned pelts, mixed with his hide that

had long needed a hot water and strong soap scrubbing and his clothes burned.

"You two conniverin' cronies think you ain't got nothin' to fight about? By the hell I'll give you cause a-plenty. Liz ketched this rank stranger lollygaggin' an' swappin' hugs and kisses with Dusty Kinkaid. I reckon that's a-plenty for you Frank Sands, because you're stuck on Dusty. That ain't all of it either. Sam Crutchfield killed the wrong man when he gut-shot Tom Sykes. It was Frank Sands, not Tom Sykes that Sam sighted one night when Dusty was quirtin' a man that was tryin' to paw her. Don't try to lie outa it, Sands. Trapper Del was bushed up a-watchin'."

Lige Taylor and Frank Sands stood out on the sandbar facing each other. Each watching the other's eyes and seeing jealous hatred slowly replace what compromise of friendship had been there. Each read the truth of Trapper Del's accusation.

THEY STOOD there for a long moment, then went at each other like a pair of fighting animals that had been held on leash and the leashes let go. It was a rough-and-tumble battle, no holts barred. The sand churned up under them as they rolled over and over and into the shallow water that broke their grips. They stood knee deep in the water and swung at each other, driving hard fists into each other's faces until blood gushed from their noses. They fell into a clinch and went down into deeper water. Lige tried to shake loose from the two hands that were gripped around his throat. He grabbed a handful of hair and held on, shoving the head under water. He lifted his head above water and pulled fresh air into his lungs and felt the strangle holt loosen. He kept his grip on Frank's hair as he lunged to his feet and dragged him ashore. Lige wiped the muddy water from his eyes and looked up and saw Trapper Del standing at the edge of the brush.

Trapper Del stood seven feet tall in his moccasins. He wore no hat and his matted graying yellow hair was filthy and hung down to his shoulders. His tobacco-stained teeth bared in a snarling grin in a heavy, dirty, grayish yellow-bearded face. A high-bridged, hawk-beaked nose jutted out through the beard and his eyes were pale yellow like a mountain lion's, deep-set above the bony cheeks. He had on a filthy glazed buckskin shirt tucked into a greasy pair of blanket-lined canvas pants. A knitted Hudson's Bay sash, the bright colored yarn faded and dirty, was knotted around his middle. His cartridge belt was wide, double-looped, the upper row filled with .45 cartridges and the lower loops with .30-30 cartridges. The rifle was in a buckskin scabbard and he carried it in the crook of his left arm. He had a long-bladed Bowie knife gripped in his right hand.

He made an awesome sight as he stood on widespread legs. Lige could read the ruthless murder in his bloodshot pale yellow eyes. In the crafty evil grin that twitched and slid across the bearded face. The foul stench that he gave off added to the sinister repulsive picture he made as he stood there with the long knife in his huge hand.

The thought of the black coffin Liz had ordered for Trapper Del flashed through Lige's mind. Then his voice, with its undertone of an animal's whining snarl, broke through the silence. "Drag 'im back into the water. Let the son drown."

"Stand back." Lige let go his holt and straightened up. He was badly winded and groggy. "It's your turn next, you sneakin' locoed son." Lige dove headlong for the two six-shooters. He rolled over and up on his feet, his gun in his hand. Trapper Del was nowhere in sight. His crazy laugh came from somewhere in the dense willow thicket.

"I dumped your bed at the cabin!" Del yelled. "I'm headed back fer the Hog Ranch to tell Liz all I seen. And I seen and heard a-plenty. Like as not she'll gimme fu'ther orders to run you off er kill you. You kin look fer Trapper Del when I take a notion to show up here. Liz don't like no kinda double-crosser. Neither does the Dusty gal. And that goes double fer Trapper Del."

"You better try that coffin on fer a fit, Trapper. You might be fillin' it before long," Lige told him.

"You won't live that long, mister," Del laughed. His moccasins made no sound as he slipped back through the willows.

FRANK SANDS rolled over on his belly and onto his hands and commenced retching. Lige sat down with his back to a big cottonwood and drained the water from his boot tops. He waited until Frank had finished and had rinsed his mouth out with water, then he walked over to where the man stood and handed him his gun, butt first. "Want to finish it, feller?" Lige asked.

"No. Not now, anyhow. I reckon you coulda drowned me." said Frank.

"I had that notion," Lige said flatly. "Then changed my mind."

"Trapper Del wanted you to finish me. Like as not you kept him from cutting my throat, ripping my belly open, so's my carcass would sink." Frank wiped the water from his eyes. "I overheard all that the two of you said. We was gettin' along fairly well till Del showed up."

"Yeah," agreed Lige. "He plumb ruined what there was of it."

"I figgered there for a while," said Frank, "that we stood some chance of doin' away with the river deadline. Mebbyso it kin still be wiped out." Both were talking now like cowhands, the girl question shoved aside.

"That's how I'd like it. But I'm just a hired hand."

"I'll talk it over with old man Hank. Mebbyso he'll take it up with Liz, now that Sam Crutchfield is in the pen." He spat out some bloody water. His eyes were bloodshot, glinting.

"But as far as Dusty Kinkaid goes, the best man wins," Frank Sands said bluntly.

"As far as she goes, mister. She belongs to me. I'll make it tough on anybody that tries to deal himself in. That goes for you or any other man. Dusty Kinkaid is goin' to be my wife."

"Sam Crutchfield told me the very same thing." Frank Sands eyed Lige, then walked over to where his saddle horse stood, mounted and headed for the river. When his horse was in deep water Frank Sands reined around and rode back to where Lige sat his horse. "I bin wonderin' from the start," he said flatly, "if you know just what you're gettin' into down here. You're a stranger in a strange land and I owe something to you for keepin' Del from cuttin' my throat. I sized you up for a sucker. Mebbyso I'm all wrong. If I am, just tell me to mind my own damn business and I'll cross over and stay on my own side of the river. But if you're goin' into this blind, don't be damn fool prideful about it. I kin put you onto a few things you'd better know before you git bogged down so deep no man can drag you out."

"Just call me a sucker and let it go at that," Lige answered. "I don't feel like takin' help from you. If you know what I mean."

"I should tell you to go to hell, and the quicker you're killed off or jailed the better. But I ain't goin' to let it go like that. Sam Crutchfield is one of the worst blackleg scoundrels that ever missed hangin'. He's mixed up with a renegade gang of horse thieves and cattle rustlers. The Hog Ranch is one of their hangouts and this place is used for a renegade crossin'. The SS line camp on the other

side is deserted for the most part in the summer so it makes an easy crossin' for his renegade outfit.

"The law sent a range detective called Tom Sykes in to get the goods on Sam Crutchfield. Sam murdered him when he found out he had a law badge. From what that locoed Trapper Del said, Liz sent you down here to play Sam's hand out. Call me on it if I'm wrong."

"I reckon you're right, Sands."

"If Liz gives Trapper Del leeway, he'll murder you. He's a locoed killer. This is no time to be mule-headed, Taylor. You better cross the river with me."

"I'm playin' my string out."

"You don't need to tell me the reason why. But damnit, you're licked before you start. No woman on earth is worth gettin' killed over."

"Why don't you speak for yourself, Sands?"

A grin spread across Frank Sands battered face. "You win. Pick up the marbles. But I ain't in your fix."

"Nope."

"Till the calf round-up starts," said Frank. "I'll be at the line camp across the river, fishin' for catfish. If you git into a bad tight, holler. What's between you and me for a quarrel, kin wait. Till then I'm on your side.

"I'm just carrying out orders from my daddy, Hank Sands. Now that Sam's gone to the pen, we're losing no time in cleanin' up the Snake Track range. Hank Sands was one of the Vigilantes that hung Sam's father to a ridge log at the Hog Ranch Saloon. Joe Crutchfield was leader of a gang of road agents and cattle rustlers. Liz was Joe's common-law wife. Sam was a kid when his father got hung, and Liz let Trapper Del raise him tough and mean and lawless.

"Dusty's father, Lee Kinkaid, happened to be at the Hog Ranch that day looking for horses. He got shot up in the ruckus, but lived. He's now blind, with one hell

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of a bitter vengeful hate inside of him.

"Trapper Del got away. Liz uses him to tend to the dirtier chores such as bush-whackin' murder to keep Sam's hands clean. Sam lost his head and killed Tom Sykes before Trapper Del got the job done.

"I've told you enough, Taylor, to show you where you stand. From here on it's up to you."

"Thanks a-plenty, Sands."

"I owe you that much. So-long. One of these days I'll fetch you over a bait of catfish."

CHAPTER THREE

A Call From the Red Barn

TWO WEEKS passed before Lige saw any man that came up close enough to talk to. He saw Frank Sands riding around the line camp across the river. Now and then he sighted a rider on this side. But nobody ever paid him a visit.

Then Trapper Del showed up one evening, on foot. He stood at the edge of the brush. "I just come from the Hog Ranch. Liz said to tell you if any men on the dodge showed up, to run them off. She said fer me to hang around to lend you a hand. Like hell I will, mister. Looks to me like Liz has gone plumb outa her right senses saying she needed you. Why she has any fu'ther need of a double-crossin' conniverin' thing like you, I can't figger out.

"I told Liz how you'd throwed in with the SS cow outfit acrost the river. But she give me strict orders not to kill you. Mebbyso I'll take 'em, but most mebby I might git forgetful like I do sometimes. Mebbyso I got it figgered out in my mind. She wants to keep you on ice till Sam Crutchfield gits outa the pen. When he shows up he'll take care of you.

"I'll stay camped around her for awhile. I got plenty grub and ca'tridges and a full jug. I'll be on the prowl of a night." Trapper Del backed into the brush. His crazy laugh came out of the shadows and filtered through the ebbing dusk.

Lige slept uneasily that night and was wide awake at the least sound. He was lying there half asleep when he heard the sound of a rifle shot in the distance, then several more shots. After that there was nothing but quiet. Lige was up at the crack of dawn. He cooked and ate breakfast and did his barn chores. He couldn't shake off the uneasy feeling of foreboding dread. He could see Frank Sands across the river with another man. They rode away into the badlands beyond and out of sight.

The sun was an hour high when Trapper Del showed up. His grin spread the dirty whiskers on his face and there was a look of evil cunning in his pale yellow eyes.

"Some fellers was headed this way in the night. I turned 'em back." His chuckle had a dry rattling sound. "I'm headed fer the Hog Ranch. Got ary message for Liz?"

"You kin tell her I'm still here."

"You kin thank me fer that. Them was Sam Crutchfield's boys I turned back last night. I taken 'em to my camp in the breaks. Made 'em shore welcome. If I had my way I'd fetch 'em all here and move you out. Sam won't like it a damn bit when he shows up. I swear I can't figger out what's got into Liz all of a sudden. She acts like she's got religion."

Trapper Del held a brown gallon jug alongside his head and gauged its contents by the gurgle. He pried the cork out with the point of his bowie knife and drank the raw whiskey like it was cool water.

"If I git drunk enough," he grinned, tamping the cork down with the heel of his hand, "I git kinda fergitful about what Liz tells me to do er what not to do. If Sam don't show up before long, one of them fergitful spells is apt to come over

me. I'm loco crazy as all hell that-away." His chuckle had the sound of a death rattle. He backed slowly into the brush, the ugly sound of his voice coming out.

"Frank Sands has got company acrost the river. Like as not it's his old man and the two of 'em is makin' war medicine. Chances are they're a-dealin' you in on it. Leastways that's what I'm agoin' to tell Liz when I git to the Hog Ranch." The brush closed in on him as he left.

If there had been anybody at the line camp across the river, Lige would have swum his horse across. But the place looked deserted. Lige rode into the badlands. He had a notion where the Red Barn was located and he was headed in that direction. His horse climbed the trail and when he reached the top Lige let him stop to get his wind.

A bullet kicked dirt up in front of him, making a whining sound as it richocheted off through the scrub pines. The sharp crack of a .30-30 carbine shattered the silence. The shot came from a sandstone rimrock about two hundred yards away. It spooked his horse and the big bay gelding whirled. Lige pulled him up and then went back down along the trail at a running walk. He wasn't afraid. All he felt was a sort of futile anger. A trapped feeling. It looked like Trapper Del and Sam Crutchfield's renegades had him fenced in.

He unsaddled and put his horse in the barn, then walked across the clearing to the cabin and stepped inside. The big battered tin dishpan sat on the table. Two big catfish wrapped in a wet sack were in the dishpan. The fish had been ripped down the belly and gutted. An empty brass .30-30 shell fell out. The steel jacket bullet was loose in the shell and he pulled it out. He fished out a cigarette paper from the inside, smoothed it out and read, *If you won't cross the river, you better sit tight. Hell's busted loose from its hot hinges. Look in your bed. Compliments of the SS outfit. But don't point it our way.*

Lige found a Winchester .30-30 carbine in a saddle scabbard shoved in under his bed tarp. Two cardboard boxes of ammunition were alongside the gun. Frank Sands must have noticed that Lige did not have a saddle gun.

It was almighty hard to hate a man like that.

SOMETIME during the night Lige Taylor came awake in the dark cabin. He found himself sitting up in bed, his six-shooter in his hand. He slept in his long underwear and his hide was clammy with cold sweat.

He knew he'd been having another one of those ugly nightmares. It was always the same bad dream about Trapper Del standing over him with a wolfish grin on his bearded face and his eyes glinting, and the bowie knife in his hand ready to slit Lige's throat.

Lige shoved the dream aside. He knew that some noise outside the cabin must have awakened him. He slid his legs over the side of the bunk and stood there in the dark, crouched a little, his gun in his hand and his bare feet gripping the pine board floor. Every nerve pulled taut, tense muscled, he stared through the dark in the direction of the closed door. Lige had left the latch string hanging outside. He could have pulled it in and thus fastened the door. But he refused to give in to what he called cowardice. Moreover it was a challenge to his own inward fear of Trapper Del. It played hell with his sleep, but that was all a part of the game he was playing.

Lige heard the faint noise of scraping wood as the heavy wooden latch lifted from its notch in the log wall and watched a man step inside and close the door after him. The rancid stench of Trapper Del filled the cabin.

"Strike a match, Trapper!" Lige's flat-

toned voice sounded louder than a pistol shot as it broke the black silence. "Before I kill you!"

Trapper Del sucked in his breath through clenched teeth like a rattlesnake hissing.

"Hold your fire, mister." Trapper's voice was a snarling whine. "I got a message fer you."

"You know where the candle is. Light it. If the knife you got in your hand is the message, you kin put it back where it belongs."

"You got eyes that kin see in the dark?"

Trapper Del pulled the head of a match along the hilt of the bowie knife in his right hand and carried the flame cupped in his left hand to the wick of the stub candle that was shoved in the neck of a whiskey bottle sitting on the table.

A sly grin slid across his bearded face and the candlelight flickered in his narrowed bloodshot pale yellow eyes. He stood with his back against the door. In the guttering shadow he looked like some gaunt-framed giant in his dirty buckskin shirt and greasy filthy canvas pants, his moccasined feet planted wide apart, the bowie knife in his hand, palmed, ready to throw.

Lige had heard of knife throwers that could match the speed of a bullet. He thumbed back the hammer of his gun.

Trapper Del wore no hat. He shook his head sideways and the matted dirty yellow long mane moved. He tossed a soiled crumpled envelope on the table and grinned. "You look shore comical in them baggy kneed underdrawers. Ain't you gonna read yore mail?"

"Try your luck with that toad-stabber, or put it away."

TRAPPER DEL looked down at the bowie knife in his hand. "Now how do you reckon I got that damn thing in my hand." He shoved the knife into the broad rawhide Indian scabbard.

"Turn around and shove your face against the door, Trapper. Keep your hands empty or I'll bust your long back with a bullet."

"Go easy, mister," Trapper Del said as he faced the door.

Lige reached for the sealed envelope. It had been slit open. "It looks like you read other peoples mail."

"Hell, no. I never seen the sense in learnin' to read ner write. But the purty smell come from the inside and I knifed 'er open to let 'er out. I bin sniffin' that purty smell all the way from the Hog Ranch."

The plain sheet of paper had a couple of drops of Liz's honeysuckle perfume staining it like tear drops.

COME TO THE RED BARN. QUICK. The letters were crudely printed. It could be that Dusty had sent him word to come to her, or the message might be from Liz. In either case it could be bait that would lead him into a gun trap—and a quick grave.

"Who gave you this, Trapper? Who sent you here?"

"That drunk half-breed stock tender at the Hog Ranch barn give it to me. He said Liz left it to give to me when I showed up. That I was to git it to you, personal."

"It says for me to get there quick. I'm takin' you along."

"Suits me. Hell, I'd be trailin' you, anyhow. Follerin' the orders I got to ride close herd on you."

"You a-horseback?" asked Lige.

"I made a pony express ride. I'll need a fresh 'un if we're goin' back to the Hog Ranch."

Lige dressed quickly, and buckled on his six-shooter and picked up the saddle gun. They saddled at the barn. When they mounted, Lige had his gun in his hand.

"You take the lead, Trapper. I'll be right behind you. In case we ride into

a bushwhacker trap, I'll shoot you in the back. Get goin'."

"I was fixin' to slit your damn throat tonight. I'd a-got the job done if my horse hadn't nickered when I rode up. The sound musta woke you up. Serves me right fer not comin' afoot." He spat a stream of tobacco juice on the ground.

"Mebbyso it's just as well. Liz woulda give me hell. I never could figger out wimmin. Liz acts like she's tetched in the head. Like she's got religion. She smashed every jug and bottle in the saloon. Taken an axe to a barrel of likker that had never bin tapped. Boarded up the winders and nailed the door shut on the Hog Ranch Saloon. She won't let any of Sam's old gang within a mile of the place. She says when Sam gits paroled, he's comin' back to a place clean as a hound's tooth. Says unless he takes an oath to travel the straight and narrer trail, she'll let him rot in the pen. The hell of it is, Liz means it. The woman's got bats in her hayloft. Meanwhile, she's usin' you fer a hired man till Sam gits out, and my job is to ride close herd on you. I figger it's all your fault, mister. If you was outa the way, Liz would come to her senses. I shoulda come afoot. I'da got the job done."

Lige grinned flatly, keeping the gun in his hand pointed at the Trapper's back as he rode ahead talking.

"When I think of all that precious likker Liz spilt on the ground, I could cut the gizzard outa that ornery female. If I'd bin there, I'd a-knifed her, shore as hell."

"What would Liz be doin', Trapper, while you was clawin' for your pig-sticker?"

"Gut-shootin' me, like as not. But it wouldn't a made much difference. I've got my coffin. Purtiest, shiniest damn thing I ever laid eyes on. I tried 'er out. I'd like to try sleepin' in her just once, to git the feel of 'er. You seen it. Ain't she the shiniest black thing you ever seen?"

"It is, for a fact. It don't matter none one way or the other. But why do you hate my guts, Trapper?"

"Fer what you're a doin' to Sam while he's locked up and can't take his own part. I raised that boy from a pup. Learnt 'em everything he knows, like I'd promised his daddy I'd raise him.

"Sam's stuck on Lee Kinkaid's gal Dusty. I'd kill ary man that trys to claim her. That goes double fer you.

"You've throwed in with the SS outfit acrost the river. Hank Sands was one of 'em that hung my side pardner Joe Crutchfield."

"Anything else you want to know to take to the grave with you?" Trapper Del twisted in his saddle and looked back at Lige.

"I'll let you know, Trapper, if I think

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of anything else. Keep on ridin'."

They rode to the head of the badlands, to where the round-up road they were following forked. It was open country now, rolling prairie land.

"This east fork leads to the Red Barn, don't it, Trapper?"

The man nodded his shaggy head, his eyes narrowed, murderous, a cunning leer on his bearded mouth.

"You take the road to the Hog Ranch, Trapper, and keep on it. You better git goin' before I change my mind and kill you. Git." Lige's eyes were dangerous.

Trapper Del's crazy laugh drifted back as he kept to a high lope until he got out of carbine range.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Last White Chip

IT WAS breaking day when Lige Taylor came within sight of the Red Barn ranch. The log cabins were on one side of the creek, consisting of the main house, eating house and kitchen and a log bunkhouse, all sod-roofed. The main house had a long veranda shaded by morning glory vines and a white picket fence enclosed rose bushes and tall lilac shrubs and a flower garden. On the other side of the creek that was spanned by a wide plank bridge was the blacksmith shop and machine and buggy shed. Four stout pole corrals that hinged together by gates and a branding chute and squeezer. A high log barn and a board and batten hayloft, and above the logs the boards had once been painted a box car red but the paint had weathered and faded and some of it peeled. The double doors at each end were wide enough to drive a four horse team and wagon through. It was the best barn Lige had ever seen.

The place had a deserted look. No lights showed. No smoke curled from the chimney of the cook cabin. No sign of life around the barn or the corrals, but there were horses in both pastures below the red barn.

Lige Taylor smelled danger as he rode to the big barn and the feel of it sent a little shiver along his spine, even before he caught sight of the dead man lying sprawled out on his back, a saddle carbine gripped in his dead hand.

Lige had only seen the dead man once before but he recognized him. The man was Hank Sands.

The barn doors were open and a strange toneless voice sounded from within. "Don't move or I'll shoot. Who are you? Answer quick!" There was a deadly hair-triggered impatience in the voice.

"I'm Lige Taylor!" He spoke quickly, to beat the bullet.

"Identify yourself, man! How do I know you're Lige Taylor?"

"I'm a rank stranger here, but that's my name. I bin livin' down at the Sam Crutchfield place."

"What fetches you here to the Red Barn?"

Lige was in a tight spot. He had no way of knowing who was questioning him. It might be one of Sam Crutchfield's renegades. Or it could be Lee Kinkaid. He had to think fast. Keep a cool head. Make it an answer that would keep the eager-triggered hidden man from shooting him out of his saddle.

"If you are Lee Kinkaid, I can give you the right answer." Lige said.

"I'm Lee Kinkaid. Half blind. But I kin sight the shadow you make against the sky. I won't miss the first shot if I ketch you in a lie. Speak your piece."

"I told your daughter Dusty that if she needed me she was to send me word and I'd come. She sent me word to come to the Red Barn. And I'm here."

"Why?"

"Because I love your daughter, and she loves me. She's going to be my wife if everything comes out right. Dusty as

much as promised me she'd marry me."

"That ties in with what she told me. Step down and lead your horse into the barn. No tellin' who's bushed up around here waitin' to cut you down. And you a plain target."

Lige dismounted quickly.

"The dead man layin' where you stand is Hank Sands. Better lug him inside before the sun gits hot. It's the least a man kin do for a man that come to warn him."

LIGE picked the dead man up in his arms and carried him into the barn and laid him on a horse blanket that was spread out inside. Then he had to go back and lead his horse in and put him in a box stall.

Lee Kinkaid's voice came from the dim shadows of a box stall. "It was Sam Crutchfield that shot Hank Sands in the back. I was inside here, and when Hank rode up I challenged him, the same as I halted you. That was before daybreak and I couldn't make him out. He said he'd come to warn me that Sam Crutchfield had busted outa the pen and to watch out for him.

"I was thankin' Hank when I heard the sound of a shot. I heard Hank hit the ground and I knew somebody had bushwhacked him. Then Sam Crutchfield spoke up.

"Sam said that he had broken out of the pen, and that he intended to do some killing. He was going to kill Frank Sands and a feller called Lige Taylor, and the only reason that kept him from killing me was I happened to be Dusty's father. But if I horned in he'd kill me.

"Then he cussed out his own mother till it made me sick inside hearin' them foul names he called a brave woman. He claimed Liz had double-crossed him. That Trapper Del had bin keepin' him posted while he was in prison. Trapper smuggled in a gun and Sam shot his way out. He claimed Trapper Del had kept his gang together and he was takin' 'em down the outlaw trail.

"Sam talked like a man who'd gone plumb locoed. He said Trapper Del and his gang had gone to the Hog Ranch to wait for him. Claimed Liz had a lot of money hid there and he was goin' to pick it up as soon as he found Dusty. Then he asked me where she was and I made a stab at lyin'. I told him that Dusty had gone down to his place to be with Lige Taylor. When he heard that, you could hear him howlin' and screamin' and cursin' ten miles away. I was hopin' he'd lose his head and come into the barn. I had a sawed-off shotgun loaded with buckshot waitin' for him. But he rode away and was gone in the dark. I knew that Dusty had already pulled out but I don't know where she was headed for."

"I didn't meet her on the trail," said Lige grimly. "I didn't run into Sam Crutchfield. When Trapper Del give me Dusty's note, I come as quick as I could make it."

"Dusty never sent you no note."

Lige explained about the perfumed letter.

"Liz must have sent it. For the first time in that woman's life Liz is scared. Not on her own account but for Dusty, and what's happened to her son Sam. She's blinded herself all these years to Sam's badness and made every sacrifice a mother kin make for a no good blackleg skalawag son. He's bin writin' her threatenin' letters that Trapper Del smuggled out of the pen, and callin' her foul names."

Lige could see Lee Kinkaid now that it was getting daylight, there in the box stall, with his back against the wall. Alongside him was a .30-30 carbine and a sawed-off shotgun and a long barreled wooden-handled six-shooter. Shells for the shotgun, cartridges for the carbine

and six-shooter arranged on a saddle blanket alongside. His face was lean and haggard looking, and deeply seamed with lines of suffering. He had a gray drooping mustache and shaggy gray hair that showed under the old felt hat he wore. Puckered clouded filmed gray eyes that peered through shaggy brows.

"I wish Dusty would show up," said the blind man. "It ain't like her to leave me in a tight . . . unless . . . unless she's gone to warn Liz, figurin' she owed it to the woman that's looked after her ever since her own mother died when she was a kid."

"If you'll stake me to a fresh horse, I'll be on my way to the Hog Ranch. Sam Crutchfield musta bin headed there when he left here." Lige Taylor's voice was flat-toned.

"You're committin' suicide when you go alone. Sam Crutchfield and Trapper Del and them ten or a dozen renegades are all killers," the blind man told Lige.

"I'll do my best or git killed. Liz sent for me. I'm drawin' her fightin' pay. I'll try to earn it." Lige's voice was sharp-edged with desperation. "I've got to find Dusty. I hope I'm not too late."

"I wish I had my eyes back fer just one minute so I could see you, Lige. To git a good look at the man Dusty picked out fer herself. I never asked a favor of God A'mighty, but I'm askin' Him now to take good care of you and Dusty. So-long, son. If a blind man's prayers count . . .?"

"We'll both be back," Lige promised, trying to sound convincing.

THE stars had paled and faded in the early dawn and the sky had a colorless empty look. It would be an hour till sunrise lent any color to the sky.

That was why the red glow that came up from the prairie skyline looked out of place. All the more out of place because Lige was headed almost due west and it was that western skyline that he was looking at as his horse traveled at a high long trot. He stood in his stirrups so deep in puzzled thought that it took him a little while to fully realize that his eyes watched no red dawn.

"Hell!" He gave voice to his thoughts. "It's a fire!"

Lige could see the brighter orange-crimson flames now that stabbed through the red glow, and the smoke, a purplish gray pall. The Hog Ranch was afire. And the distant sound of gunfire carried down wind to him and the dim sound of men shouting and hollering wildly.

Lige topped a ridge and rode across a mile of wide benchland. His horse was blowing, wet with sweat, when he pulled up on the far side of the high bench and looked down across a wide flat. He could see the Hog Ranch with two of the scattered log buildings afire. Men rode up and down and circled back, shooting and yelling.

Then they bunched and stayed that way for a minute or so. Now they rode off and away, headed south towards the badlands. Lige counted eleven horsebackers traveling in bunches of three or four as they fanned out and slowed their horses to a jog-trot.

Lige twisted in his saddle and turned his head quickly when he heard the pounding of shod hoofs coming from somewhere behind. He stared, squint eyed at the lone rider headed his way and coming up within range of the .30-30 carbine he slid from the saddle scabbard. The rider took off his hat and waved it. Lige recognized Frank Sands, and pulled off his hat and waved it in a come-on motion. He was never more glad to see any man in his life.

Frank Sands face had a grayish look under the week's stubble. His eyes were bloodshot and the color of old ice. He forced a grin, then made a motion towards the riders who were leaving the

Hog Ranch. Then he started talking.

"My boys got orders to round 'em up." Frank looked at Lige now. "Old man Hank was due to meet us over an hour ago. You seen anything of him along the trail?" asked Frank.

"I hate to break the bad news, Frank. Your father is dead. Sam Crutchfield shot him in the back at the Red Barn." Lige told him what had happened.

There was a hard light in Frank's eyes. "I wanted to go along with him, but he said my job was to ramrod the outfit till he showed up."

Frank took a pair of army field glasses from an old leather case strapped to the fork of his saddle, and handed them to Lige.

"See what you kin see down yonder, Lige."

Lige focused the field glasses. He got his first good look at what was called the Hog Ranch. Then he focused the glasses on two men and a woman who stood in front of a log cabin with boarded-up windows and the door torn off its hinges. He couldn't quite make out the weathered paint on the sign over the door but he reckoned it was SALOON. One of the men was the seven foot Trapper Del with a wicker demijohn in one hand. The other man's face was marred by whiskers but there could be no mistake about it being Sam Crutchfield. The woman was Liz, in a shapeless old loose fitting wrapper, a heavy shawl across her shoulders. Lige could see the bleached hair that looked like it was wrapped around leather curlers. She stood facing the two men and it looked like her big arms were folded and she had a defiant stance.

Lige tried to see through the open doorway of the saloon but it was too dark inside. His glasses scanned everywhere around in hopes of picking up Dusty in their focus. "No sign of Dusty," he said grimly.

"Dusty's safe. I headed her off before she run into that trap at the Hog Ranch. She put up a scrap. I had to set her afoot and hogtie her and leave my best cowhands to ride herd on her. Dusty kin give a mule-skinner cards and spades and beat him cussin'."

FRANK SANDS was pulling a pint of whiskey from the pocket of his chaps when Lige handed him the glasses. He shoved the glasses back into the leather case and gouged the cork out of the bottle with a knife blade.

"First drink I taken since the night I got drunker'n seven hundred dollars and tried to kiss Dusty on the way back home after a dance. I never could handle my likker. But there comes a time when a man needs a drink. After you, Lige."

Lige tilted the bottle and took a big drink, and handed it back. "Looks like there's two men that need a drink," said Lige.

"Whatever happens, Sam Crutchfield belongs to me. You're welcome to Trapper Del. Anybody else down yonder?" Frank's eyes were bleak.

"None that I could see," said Lige.

"I didn't reckon there would be. Those two wouldn't want any witnesses to what they plan on doin' to Liz. Time we got down there."

Frank took a big drink and corked the bottle, then rode along the bench to where it sloped off. It took about fifteen minutes for them to get down the trail and another quarter of an hour to come up the trail that twisted through the brush along the creek, the high willows and buck brush hiding them until they were within shooting distance of the buildings. They dismounted and left their horses behind the brush. They shed their chaps and spurs. Frank shoved the pint in the flank pocket of his Levis and both men had their saddle guns when they went on foot. Frank was in the lead and

Lige followed at his heels. When they came up behind the saloon, they halted, crouched, gripping their guns and listening.

"The only mistake I made," Liz's voice sounded hard, bitter, "was hidin' you out, Trapper Del, when I should have turned you over to the Vigilantes that hung Sam's father. I thought I might need you and I let you beg off. You'll never know how many times since then I bin tempted to kill you. I paid for that oversized coffin, hopin' the time would come when I'd kill you and lay your stinkin' carcass in it."

"Where's that coffin of mine, Liz?"

"Where you can't find it, Trapper, unless you talk Sam into doin' what I say. Without that coffin, the varmints will tear your dead carcass apart and scatter the bones from hell to breakfast. The wolf pups will gnaw your bones while the old 'uns fight over your spilled guts, Trapper. And a coyote mother bitch will swipe an arm or leg bone and carry it off to her den to her pups."

"Shut up, Liz." Sam's voice was ugly, saw-edged. "Where's the money my hung father left behind fer me. It's mine, and I'm here to claim it. Better hand it over before I turn you over to Trapper Del."

"It's hid out, like Trapper Del's coffin," said Liz. "Over a hundred thousand dollars and all of it dirty money that's bin blood-stained. Money your father and Trapper Del got from robbing stage coaches and the mail and Wells Fargo strong boxes. Your father deserved hangin,' Sam, and you bin cheatin' the rope all along when you traveled with Trapper Del.

"I'll make a deal. I'll give you enough for a South America stake. When you get down there, drop me a letter, and I'll send the balance. But let Dusty Kinkaid and her father alone. Dusty is goin' to marry a real man, with clean hands. I planned on Dusty marrying you Sam, but now I'd rather see her dead. You're no longer a son of mine.

"It won't do you no good to beat me up again, or for Trapper Del to use that knife on me. No pain can ever hurt me, now. I got the marked cold deck, and you'll play the cards I deal you for a hand, or you don't sit in the game."

"SET fire to her house, Trapper." Sam's voice was thick, snarling. "All she's got in the world is inside. She's like a miser with them diamonds and rubies and sapphires and pearl necklaces she takes outa her strong box and spends the night puttin' 'em on till she's decked out like some old wore out last year's Christmas tree. She used to tell me that when she died she'd leave that jewelery to Dusty after we was married. Pour coal oil all over everything inside, Trapper, then step to the door with a match in your hand. We'll see then if she still wants to keep the deal." Sam bit off a rasping laugh. "Gimme that jug. A man gits dry, talkin'."

FRANK Sands had eased open the back door. He tip-toed in and Lige followed him. Inside it was a shambles. Broken bottles and glasses and broken chairs and tables littered the place. They had to move cautiously. They crouched, looking out through the doorway of the saloon. They watched Trapper Del cross the stage road and go into the main house across the way. Sam Crutchfield stood spread-legged. Dirt and sweat grimed his unshaven lantern-jawed face. His pale eyes were bloodshot, slitted, evil, and the gun in his hand was pointed at his mother.

Liz's face was bruised and both eyes swollen and discolored. Blood smears had dried on her skin and her bleached hair had come undone from the curlers and was dirty and blood-smeared, scraggly. She stood straight backed, her head lifted

and her badly swollen eyes unafraid.

Frank's hand closed over Lige's hand that held his six-shooter. Lige fought down the urge to kill Sam Crutchfield. He felt cold and empty inside. When he looked at Frank he realized how Frank must feel because there stood the man who had murdered his father.

Trapper Del showed in the doorway and tossed out an empty five gallon kerosene can.

"Set the damn thing afire, Trapper!" Sam shouted.

"No need gittin' hasty, Sam!"

Trapper Del stepped back inside. When he showed in the doorway it was against a background of roaring flame. He had to leap out into the street to escape the flames that roared behind him.

Liz's bruised mouth spread in a slow grin that widened.

"There was a false bottom in Trapper Del's coffin. That's where I cached the hundred thousand dollar road agent loot your hanged father left behind for you, Sam.

"Take a good look at that bonfire you set, Trapper. You too, Sam. It's costin' you both plenty, because Trapper Del's coffin is goin' up in smoke."

A harsh, animal scream was torn from Trapper Del's throat as he tried to go back through the doorway and was driven back by the blasting heat.

Sam's face was livid, his lips twitching, his hard pale eyes seared. He mouthed incoherent blasphemy when he pulled the trigger of the gun he held pointed at Liz.

The bullet staggered her and she stood there swaying, a twisted, bitter smile on her bruised mouth. "That's the only kind thing, Sam," Liz spoke in a toneless voice, "that you ever did for the mother that bore you." Then she fell.

Sam stared at Liz with hate-seared eyes, the smoking six-shooter in his hand, then whirled and ran across the road to where Trapper Del was running back and forth like a madman, waving his long arms, peering into the windows.

"It's in there!" he screamed. "I seen my coffin in there!" Trapper Del smashed the window panes with his rifle barrel and started to climb through. Sam was right behind him, shoving at his back. But the flame blast drove him back, his dirty shaggy mane and beard on fire. Trapper Del dropped his rifle and was using both hands to paw out the singing hair. Sam tried to shove him back through the window, yelling at him.

"Git your coffin, Trapper! You gotta have a coffin! Shove it through the window and I'll yank it out. Git in there, you locoed crazy son of a. . . . !"

Trapper swung a leg over the sill and got his head and shoulders inside. The blast of billowing fire drove him back. Sam kept pushing. Trapper Del flailed a long arm in a wild swing that caught

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Sam alongside the head and knocked him backwards.

FRANK Sands and Lige Taylor came out through the saloon door. They stood side by side, their guns in their hands, waiting for Sam Crutchfield and Trapper Del to discover them.

Sam was the first to sight them. He let out a hoarse shout of warning and Trapper Del looked up. Sam took a quick shot at Frank Sands.

Frank Sands gun spat a jet of flame and the .45 slug hit Sam low in the guts and doubled him up.

Lige put two heavy .45 slugs in Trapper Del before he got the hammer of his six-shooter thumbed back and the trigger pulled. Del was dying on his feet. It took all his last ebbing strength to turn and lurch through the open doorway behind him, into the blazing inferno.

Lige shook his head as if to clear that horrible vision. Then he looked down and saw Frank Sands sitting propped against the log wall of the saloon.

Lige squatted beside him and ripped the leg of Frank's levis with his stock knife, and used his black silk neck handkerchief for a tourniquet.

Both men were aware of the sounds of distant gunfire. They lifted their heads when they heard the pounding of shod hoofs. Dusty came down at them and was on the ground in seconds.

Frank shoved Lige away. There was a twisted grin on his face.

"Rise and shine, Lige!"

Dusty's face was grimed and her shirt torn. She was chalk white under the dirt smear, but the color came back into her face when Lige took her in his arms.

"I ain't got but a little time left, young 'uns." Liz's voice came from where she lay, her bleached hair pillowed in the dust.

Dusty was on the ground beside her, lifting her head gently.

"Don't cry over me, baby. I'm glad it's over. Glad I'm driftin' yonderly. I never was very happy while I was alive. All I hoped to leave you has gone up in that bonfire. You wouldn't have taken it anyhow.

"Johnny, the station agent, always hankered to own this stage line. I'm leavin' the Hog Ranch and the stage line to him.

"So I got nothin' left to leave you, baby." Liz smiled, softening lines etched by grief and disillusionment and bitterness and pain. "But you don't need nothin', baby, you got Lige."

Dusty's tears splashed down gently on Liz's face as she kissed the older woman and smoothed back her hair. Liz closed her eyes, dead now in Dusty's arms.

The shooting had stopped. The SS cowhands drifted in. They had cleaned up on the renegades. Killed some and told the rest to quit the country.

Dusty cleansed and bandaged the flesh wound in Frank's thigh. Now and then he took a drink to ease the pain. He grinned when he joshed Lige and Dusty.

"You'll need a man to stand behind you, Lige, to hold you up if you git weak kneed while the parson ties the knot. I'm askin' for the job."

"You're hired, Frank."

Lee Kinkaid died a few months after Dusty and Lige were married. He had already turned over to Lige the Red Barn horse ranch. Frank Sands married a girl he had known since their school days. The Missouri River is no longer the deadline between the two outfits.

They claim that along the wide Missouri river where the broken badlands are, that whenever a wolf howls and the coyotes pick up the wolf howl and add their yapping chorus, whenever a moutain lion screams in the night, it has a meaning. The varmints are on the night prowl hunting for Trapper Del's carcass.

THE END

HAND OF THE GUN-GODS

By JOHN H. HOLLAND

His hand, to Charlie Ardmore, was the world's greatest instrument, because it played a deadly powdersmoke paean of power. . . .

CHARLIE ARDMORE stuck his feet out ahead of him and pushed with his toes against the seat across the way. The fat drummer was asleep, his hat pulled down across his face and his head half out the window, taking the knocks when the reeling stage got crossed in the ruts or struck a rock. His hands lay slack in his lap, palms up and the soft, short fingers curled. His ample belly shook under the checkered vest and his watch fob dripped heavily from the middle of a thin brass chain. Charlie pulled his boots back under him and took a deep breath of the chill morning air.

The horses drove madly down the road

Soft, he thought, looking at the drummer. Soft, but plenty damn lucky. Charlie looked down at his own right hand.

He turned it palm up and studied the thick, work-worn skin, the heavy callouses and deep clear lines. It was a big ham of a hand, a hard hand with long limber fingers and knobby joints. It was a hand that curled easily around the butt of a .44. A sure hand. A piece of Charlie Ardmore, but not really Charlie's. A hand with a mind of its own.

A mind and a trained set of reflexes that fit it perfectly to the thing it had to do. A hand with a job all its own and all Charlie had to do was carry it around. It was Charlie Ardmore's job to see to it that the hand was in the right place at the right time. There was none of Charlie in it. He grunted and even as he watched, it seemed to him that the fingers curled and uncurled all on their own.

Like the drummer's tongue, Charlie thought. A piece of a man that a man hauls around and people think it's him.

Like the drummer. What would the drummer be without his tongue? Or the driver? Supposing you took his whip? Take the shotgun rider's shotgun and he'd have to buy a ticket. Or the girl.

A dancer. Riding this stage now to take her feet to Eagle Rock where she'd put them on the stage and let them dance. But it only took half a man to look at her and see that she was more than just feet. She was a woman.

She sat back against the seat across the way, still asleep, her fancy feathered hat cocked down over one eye, pushed that way when her head banged against the stage coach window. Her mouth was slightly open and a wisp of her brown hair floated on the chill morning wind that blew past her head, coming in through the window. So sitting there, Charlie could see that she was a woman. But still, she was a dancer, and last night when she'd got on back at Wallsenburg Crossing and the Kid had started her talking, that was what she'd talked about. Dancing.

And the Kid had strung her along. Talking with her, the Kid had been able to do a thing that Charlie couldn't do because he saw nothing in his hand that was worth talking about. A thing that the drummer couldn't manage because his tongue knew only the talk that sold cigars and the dancer hadn't been interested. So it had been the Kid who'd won her over, because the Kid was a neck in the same way that Charlie was a hand and the woman was her feet. And the Kid hadn't wanted to talk about his neck right then. Charlie shifted uncomfortably in his seat and looked to his left at the Kid.

Shubal Waters, his name was. But he'd found out he had a hand before he found out about his neck and now Charlie was taking him in to Eagle Rock to hang. The Kid's hand wasn't any good to him now. It lay on the stage coach seat, cuffed to Charlie's left wrist and looking down at it, Charlie couldn't help wondering.

It wasn't a lot different than Charlie's own hand. Not when you looked at it. But it hadn't been as good as Charlie's back at the Mexican's house. Charlie's hand had been enough better than the Kid's to shoot the .44 that the Kid had clawed for, knocking it out of his hand. So the Kid sat here now, a neck rather than a hand, and Charlie had to fight himself to make himself believe it.

It must have been sudden, the change. Charlie would even bet that if the Kid thought of it at all, he still thought of himself as a hand. Or maybe the Kid was lucky. Maybe he wasn't old enough to think. Charlie shook his head and frowned down at his boot toe. The fingers of his hand curled and uncurled in his lap and he thought on it: What would become of him if he lost his hand, and the stage

rumbled on toward Eagle Rock, all but Charlie and the driver nodding fitfully in their sleep as the sun sent streaks of copper across the steel gray sky in the East.

BUT Charlie must have slept. There was the distant shot that half stirred him and then the booming of the guard's shotgun up on top of the stage. Charlie sat bolt upright and the driver's whip cracked and the horses drove madly down the road, the stage reeling in their wake.

Almost before he thought, Charlie slammed the Kid against the wall to his left and rose out of his seat, turning as he rose to face the Kid, his back to the dancer, his hand full of gun and steady and sure in front of him. The Kid jerked at the cuffs on his hand, then looked up at Charlie and down at the gun.

"Just sit," Charlie said.

The Kid looked once at the gun and sat back in his seat, still sleepy in the eyes.

It was lighter now, and he could make out the forms of three riders on his side of the coach and up ahead. They rode hell-bent across the flat, coming at an angle that would put them across the road somewhere up ahead. Charlie could see they meant to stop the coach and the only reason they could have for wanting to do that would be the Kid.

The Kid's face was blank. Impassive. Awake, now, but showing nothing that Charlie could think of as hope. So it could be that the riders weren't after the Kid. But it wouldn't do to take any chances. Charlie stuck out his foot and tapped the drummer's shin.

"Get in my right coat pocket," he yelled. "The key."

The drummer came ahead out of his seat and his arm went out and he dipped into Charlie's pocket, watching the Kid all the time it took him. The guard's gun boomed again and it seemed to Charlie that the drummer took too much time. But then his hand was in his coat and then it came up with the key in it, held out where Charlie could grab it.

"Unlock the cuffs," Charlie said. He poked the gun up close under the Kid's chin. The Kid sat there, his face blank, and then he let his eyes roll down for a long look at the gun.

The drummer fumbled with the key, dropped it once and took a full minute to get it up off the jouncing stage coach floor. The guard fired again and there were three answering shots from the riders and then the drummer was on his knees, the cuffs caught in his left hand, his right trying to get the key into the cuffs. Charlie wanted to cuss him out, but he knew he'd have to keep watching the Kid.

Then he felt the cuff fall away from his wrist and he backed enough to half sit on the dancer's lap, the gun still leveled at the Kid's throat.

"Grab under your knees, Kid," Charlie said.

The Kid looked at him for a minute, then at the gun and made up his mind. He raised his legs, bent in front of him and ran his hands in under his knees.

Charlie slapped the drummer's shoulder.

"Put the cuffs on him."

The drummer went ahead to his knees, got the cuffs up off the floor and slipped them up under the Kid's knees. The Kid looked down at him and then at the gun, measuring the distance and his chances. Charlie sat back harder against the dancer and for a minute, there, he could feel his hand drawing up tight, itching to shoot the Kid. But then the Kid gave it up and held his hands down where the drummer could get them into the cuffs.

When the drummer had finished and the Kid sat there hugging under his knees with his hands cuffed, Charlie reached out and pulled the Kid off the seat and let him bounce down onto the floor. Then he stood up again, waved the dancer down

beside the Kid and told the drummer to find a corner. Then Charlie stuck his head out the window.

ONE of the riders was closing now, riding almost alongside the coach, but a good ways out. Charlie squeezed off one shot at him, but the stage struck a rut in the road and the shot went wild. Charlie cussed himself for a fool, trying to hit a man at that distance. He jammed his .44 into his belt and swung his head farther out the window.

He yelled up to the guard, asking him if he had another shotgun, but the only answer was the crack of the driver's whip. Charlie yelled again, and had made up his mind to climb out the window and up on top when the barrel of the shotgun came jutting out over the top of the stage-coach. Charlie reached up and grabbed it.

He pulled straight down on the barrel, but the heavy stock overbalanced his pull and the shotgun swung out and down. The stock caught in the spokes of the off front wheel and the gun spun out of his hand and went off, blasting a hole in the side of the coach. Charlie looked at the hole, wondering at the red he saw and then the burning pain spread up his arm and seared his brain. Charlie pulled his gun hand in and looked at it.

It wasn't much of a hand. And Charlie had trouble trying to keep his mind on it, the sense of shock was so numbing and the meaning of what had happened to him so strong. He sat down on the seat across from the drummer, his hand in his lap.

He looked down at it once and saw that the bleeding was mostly just an oozing, but when he tried to move it the fingers lay still and it was like yelling to a man upwind and out of earshot. Charlie gave up trying to get his fingers to work and looked across at the drummer.

He was sprawled face down on the seat, his knees pulled up under him, his hands clutching his coat collar up around the back of his neck. Charlie thought for a minute of yelling at him that he needed help, but he knew from looking at the man that it wouldn't do any good. Charlie bent ahead, his hand curled in his lap and tapped the dancer on the shoulder.

She raised her head, the feathered hat gone now, and Charlie pointed with his left hand down at his lap.

"It's my hand," he said and bent toward her. She frowned, looking at his eyes, and Charlie knew she hadn't understood. There was too much noise with the stage charging ahead too fast, and the dancer was too much afraid. Charlie could see that in her face and in the way she kept looking at him and not at his hand. He pulled it up out of his lap and held it in front of her face where she had to see it.

"Oh, no!" she gasped and Charlie half expected her to shrink back away from him. But she only looked at the hand for a minute, horror all across her face, and then as suddenly as it had come, the look was gone and she was tearing at her underskirt. Charlie didn't know what good that would do.

All the underskirts she had wouldn't help him get his hand back and there wasn't anything she could do about it now. Charlie cussed himself for a fool again. He never should have asked for help. He laid his hand back in his lap and turned away from the woman, clutching the gun in his waist.

He hauled it out and it lay strange and unfamiliar in the palm of his left hand. He sat there, looking at the gun and there was another shot from one of the riders. Charlie heard the driver scream, and the whip barked again. He raised the gun in his left hand and aimed it out of the window.

But none of it felt right. Everything was all out of line with the gun in his

left hand and he tried to draw a bead on one of the riders, but he couldn't hold it. Charlie gave it up and pulled the gun back in through the window. He laid it in his lap, next to his hand and stared down at it. He knew then there had never been anything of him in it. He'd been a hand all his life and now he had no hand so he had to be nothing. It surprised him that he wasn't more disappointed than he was.

He looked across at the dancer, tearing at her underskirts and he wondered how it would be for her when she lost her feet. He even thought of asking her how it would be for her, thinking that if he asked, maybe she'd understand then and could think of a way to help him besides just her underskirts. But Charlie couldn't see what the way would be and he thought of the drummer, lying there face down on the seat, and he knew then that he was better off than the drummer, even without a hand. The drummer had only his tongue and that wasn't as dependable as a hand. Charlie leaned ahead, thinking to pat the drummer on the back and tell him to cheer up, that he knew how he felt. But then one of the riders fired again, bringing Charlie back out of himself.

And this time the shot must have done some good.

IMMEDIATELY, the stage began to sway wildly and then to fill with dust and the steady drumming of the horses hoofs had broken to a wild, shattered rhythm. The stage coach veered drunkenly to the left, throwing the drummer down to the floor on top of the Kid and then it struck a rut, tilted up and raced along, balanced on two wheels.

It snapped to the ground and all four wheels again. There was a whiplike sudden lurch, the stage swerved again around to the left, jarred, tilted up, hung and then crashed to the ground on its side, grinding along in the mesquite. Rocks the size of apples cascaded around inside the coach and the dust filled Charlie's lungs and stung his eyes. He grabbed wildly with his injured hand and the pain of it when he caught the wooden seat edge made him let go again. He rolled around inside the coach, banging his head against the wooden seat next to the drummer and then landing on top of the Kid who was jammed down against the door.

The coach dragged along on its side, slowing, and then banged into a large rock, bounced once and stopped, filled with chocking dust. There was the raining sound of settling dust with pebbles in it and as the air began to clear, Charlie saw alternate bars of shadow and light, flashing like cavalry wheeling past his line of sight. Then the dust was gone and he felt the Kid stirring under him and heard the soft whirring of the still turning wheels on the high side.

The drummer lay on his back in the dirt, the breath knocked out of him, rolling and tossing in soundless desperation, trying to fill his lungs. The dancer had landed on her feet.

Charlie stuck out his left hand and caught at one of the ribs in the roof and pulled himself up. He stood there, facing the dancer, his feet spread wide and the Kid and the drummer between them.

The dancer's eyes were blank and shining and even when the voices drifted in from outside and the horse pounded past, no expression crossed her face. Charlie reached up to open the door and then he heard the feet scrambling on the wood outside and then up on top and a man in a wide brown hat looked down into the coach.

He had a gun pointed down at Charlie and when he saw the dancer, he pulled it back out of sight and then reached down through the window and caught the dancer under the arms. He lifted her bodily up through the window and then

Charlie heard his feet scuff up on the side of the stage.

"How many's hurt?" someone outside asked.

"Just the one that I can see, Walt," the man on top of the stage said.

"It ain't the Kid?"

"Give me time. I ain't got a good look yet."

Then Charlie saw the hat again above his head and the man looked down into the coach. He squinted against the dust and the dim light and after he'd looked for a while, he stuck his arm down into the coach and pointed at the Kid, lying in a little ball on the ground.

"What's that?"

Charlie held up his good hand. "Give a lift," he said. "I hurt my hand and can't climb up."

The man put his hand on Charlie's shoulder and shoved him to one side. He studied the Kid for a while and then he pulled back a ways and turned his head.

"There's one of 'em down on the bottom with cuffs on."

"That'll be the Kid. Haul him out."

THE man on top pulled away from the window and there was only the square patch of gray sky. Then his boots came down through the window and he dropped into the coach.

He bent, lifted the drummer by the belt, dumping him in a corner. The drummer coughed once and sat bent over his knees, gasping. Then the man in the brown hat bent over the Kid, turned him face up and looked at him.

"It's him, all right," the man yelled. Then he dropped to one knee and tried to slip his hand under the Kid's knees and behind his back. The Kid started kicking with his feet.

The man in the brown hat stood up, looking down at the Kid. Then, very slowly, he lifted one boot back and kicked the Kid in the mouth.

There was the flat little slap of the Kid's teeth and he quit lashing out with his legs. Charlie came awake.

He grabbed the man by the arm and swung him around, but he tripped over one of the drummer's outstretched legs and fell against the side of the coach. The man drew his gun and held it about level with Charlie's middle.

He had bleak little gray eyes and he needed a shave. He wasn't a face Charlie knew from any dodgers and from the look to his clothes and the way he wore his holster high, Charlie got the notion that he wasn't an outlaw. More likely a puncher. But a puncher with the Kid on his mind. A puncher who didn't mean to take any foolishness. Charlie watched him stick out one foot again. Only this time he tapped the drummer's shin.

"Lift the Kid out," the puncher said. He kept his eyes on Charlie while he said it. Charlie tried to stare him down, but when he heard the drummer scrambling to his feet and when he finally got standing, Charlie had to move so the drummer could open the door.

Then the drummer bent down and picked up the Kid. He lifted him up through the open door and sat him on the edge of the coach, his feet hanging down along the roof. There was a minute of silence then and finally Charlie heard a horse stepping ahead. Then a saddle creak, right in close and someone slapped the Kid again.

"All right, Lew, come on out."

The man in the brown hat backed away from Charlie. He was very careful about the gun when he reached up to boost himself out of the stage. He used only his left hand and then, gathering all his strength to jump up through the door, he had to lift his gun hand.

Charlie jumped him.

He hit the man in the brown hat somewhere around his belt and drove him back against the seat belt. Then he pulled

away from him and slapped him across the face with his wounded hand. He grabbed the gun barrel with his left hand and twisted it out and brought his right knee up into the puncher's chin.

The man sagged and fell forward.

Charlie stood there, the gun hanging heavy in his left hand, eyeing the drummer. The drummer stood with his back against the upended stagecoach floor, protected in the notch between the seats. He was breathing heavily.

"Damn it, Lew. Come out of there!"

It was the man on the horse outside the coach. Charlie stepped up close to the drummer, flipped his watch fob with the barrel of the puncher's gun and hissed at the drummer.

"Get on up and pull me through."

THE drummer wet his lips. His eyes rolled down toward the gun and then back to Charlie's face. He nodded abruptly and Charlie stepped back. The drummer reached up and caught each side of the door and Charlie boosted him up with the gun.

Charlie made a hook out of his right elbow and was surprised to find that it was hard to keep it bent without a fist to double up and work against. But the drummer caught hold of him firmly enough and Charlie went up.

Up in the air, the first thing Charlie saw was the horse. Then the rider.

The man was a rancher. It stuck out all over him in the way he sat his horse.

The man waved at Charlie's hand.

"Get his gun, Shorty."

A small puncher on a black mare came up toward the stage from off to Charlie's left and Charlie looked at him.

He was another one like the man in the coat. There was none of it that was right. They weren't the kind of men who'd have traveled with the Kid. They weren't out to set him free and maybe kill the man who'd arrested him into the bargain. They were ranchers. And Charlie could see they'd made a mistake, thinking he was going to turn the Kid over to them. Charlie raised the gun and held it on Shorty.

"Just stay where you are," he ordered.

Shorty reined up and sat there.

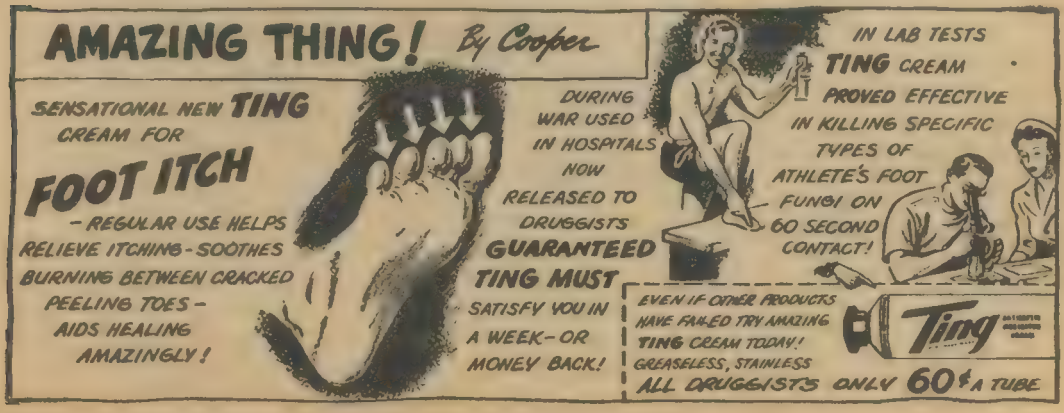
"You're making a mistake," Charlie said. "The Kid's my prisoner. I'm bound to take him in and I intend to do it. Now down off that horse, Shorty. And get me another one for the Kid."

Shorty looked back at the man in the coat.

"What about it, Walt."

The man in the coat crossed his hands on the horn of his saddle and looked steadily at Charlie.

"Mister," he said, "I'm fixing to save the law some expense and much obliged to do it. The Kid shot my brother six months back and I swore I'd see him dead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if he ever set foot in my sight. I can see him fine from where I sit and he ain't dead. So put up your gun or start your play. Otherwise, we'll sit here until you bleed to death out of the hand of yours."

The Kid was a neck. And being a neck, it wouldn't be long after he got to Eagle Rock that he'd be nothing but a box. So Charlie couldn't see that it made a lot of difference.

THE dancer stood in the road, ignored by the riders that Walt and Shorty and Lew had with them. So she couldn't get anywhere with her feet. And the drummer.

Charlie felt sorry for the drummer again. All the man had was a tongue and a man's tongue left him sooner than his hand or his neck or his feet. So the drummer was helpless and it was up to Charlie.

Charlie shifted his weight on the edge of the coach and then, only half watching Walt, he tossed the gun over into his gun hand and squeezed one off at Shorty's right wrist.

He missed. He didn't even come close.

Shorty got his gun out and took his time bringing it around to Charlie and then for the first time, Charlie knew that it wasn't true. He'd been in all those fights he'd had. And it hadn't been his hand. It'd been him and now, when his hand wouldn't work for him, he'd been fool enough to try to use it anyway. Charlie tossed the gun back to his left hand.

But right then Lew stood up in the door between Shorty and Charlie and Charlie hesitated. Lew was still groggy and he didn't seem to know where he stood. But he had the right idea.

He grabbed Charlie by the knees. He didn't do more than hug them, but he was trying and Charlie knew that the thing in Lew that made him try wasn't any one part of him you could put a name to. It was something more than that. It was the man in him.

"Listen," Charlie said, trying to get Lew away from his knees. "Listen a minute. Think about the Kid a minute. Think what you're wanting to do about the man in him. You're going to kill him without even thinking about what he feels. You're—"

"Don't bother making any speech," Walt growled. "What about my brother? Did the Kid think about what my brother was feeling?"

Charlie shook his head.

"No. He didn't. That's what makes the Kid what he is. But if you kill the Kid now, you'll be no better than he is. And even then, we've got to prove he's all the things we say he is. That's the only way to keep from thinking of men by the things they do or are. So I say let me take the Kid on in to Eagle Rock."

Walt thought on it a minute, his hands crossed on the horn of his saddle. Then he turned to Shorty.

"Set the stage back up and see about the team. Then drive back and get the driver and the guard. We'll take the Kid on in to Eagle Rock."

Charlie sighed and lay back on the side of the stage, the gun falling out of his left hand. He lay back like that for a while and then he felt them lifting him off and then the dancer was down on the ground beside his head and she was doing something to his hand that made it feel a lot better. Charlie looked down to see what it was she was doing. But she was only bandaging his hand. No balms. No medicines except the stuff that seemed to flow from her own hands.

Charlie had to laugh to himself about that. It was a good one on him, all right. He could see how wrong he'd been, thinking what he had about people.

Suppose she'd been just what I thought and had to bandage me with her feet.

IN THE SADDLE

ONE of our old Western customs is under fire again. We got a batch of such customs. Like working, fighting, praying, gambling and drinking, among others. All of them, at one time or another, have attracted brickbats from interested parties.

This time gambling, namely, is the big, bad devil in the woodpile.

Wagering a deuce here and there may be wrong, but our old pioneers—or a hell of a lot of them—didn't seem to think so. Sunday mornings in California's early-day gold camps was given over to washing dirty sox and getting rid of the lice. But in the PM it was different. Ah, yes! Then the boys, prettied up as best they could, moved in to town to get rid of their dust at faro, roulette or twenty-one. Nobody made them go. Just human nature. Even when there were no pro gamblers to buck, the miners got along famously among themselves. Like the boys on the Yuba River.

Here four partners in one of the richest claims in the district got to playing five-dollar ante poker. They raised it to twenty-five bucks ante each, and Jack Breedlove, one of the partners, cleaned out the rest of them, pocketing twenty-two thousand bucks. The boys wanted more so they staked their interests in the claim, valuing a fourth at ten thousand dollars and, when the game quit, Zeke Roubier, a second partner, had gotten back eight thousand and still held on to his fourth interest.

The other two went broke and Breedlove finished up by owning three-fourths of the claim and winning fourteen thousand dollars, so that altogether he was thirty-four thousand dollars ahead. His partners moved to new territory.

So, like a famous American spouted off recently, to get rid of gambling you have to shoot all the horses, seal up all the dice and decks of cards in government warehouses and then put all the gamblers in concentration camps.

Fundamentally, it appears that the America of today hasn't changed radically from the days of the Forty-niners. Those who wish to are free to pray, to work, to fight, to drink and to gamble (after a fashion.) We probably ain't one hundred per cent correct but it still makes America the best place to live on earth.

Dime Western Magazine believes it a privilege to be able to present to the American people stories depicting the human and hard-bitten, courageous and glorious roles played by their forefathers on the colorful stage of the Old Frontier.

October *Dime Western Magazine*—out September 1st!

—The Editor

THE GHOST TRAP

By GEORGE C. APPELL

LITTLE HORN lay in the crisp snow on the north side of the ravine through which the source waters of Punished Man's sluiced from the hills, his quick black eyes following the movements of the fur-capped men approaching the ravine from the south. They were on foot, slipping and stumbling, unsure of the way; the snow-hung woods dazzled their vision and finally they stopped. There were only four of them and Little Horn knew them all.

He wanted to rig a lynx trap on that south side, and he hoped they'd go away. They weren't supposed to be up here anyway. This was supposed to be open country, up here near Canada. And they were cavalrymen, and cavalrymen should stay in horse country and not flounder through unmarked game trails where even the lynx had difficulty. The first figure, the bulky, black-mustached man with the sly eyes, the major named Barstow, began cursing. Little Horn couldn't hear the words but he knew this Barstow and knew from his expression that he was cursing intently.

The drifting snow had pulled a white curtain across Little Horn's tracks, erasing his trail completely, as he had wanted it to be erased. The drums were quiet and Sitting Bull lay newly-dead in a frozen grave, shot by the Indian Police, and the ghost dancing was supposed to be over and the blood-letting with it. But still the pony soldiers ferreted through the hills, searching for what they called strays.

Little Horn had been described as a stray, though he was harming nobody, so it was best to cover his tracks across the land of his own ancestors.

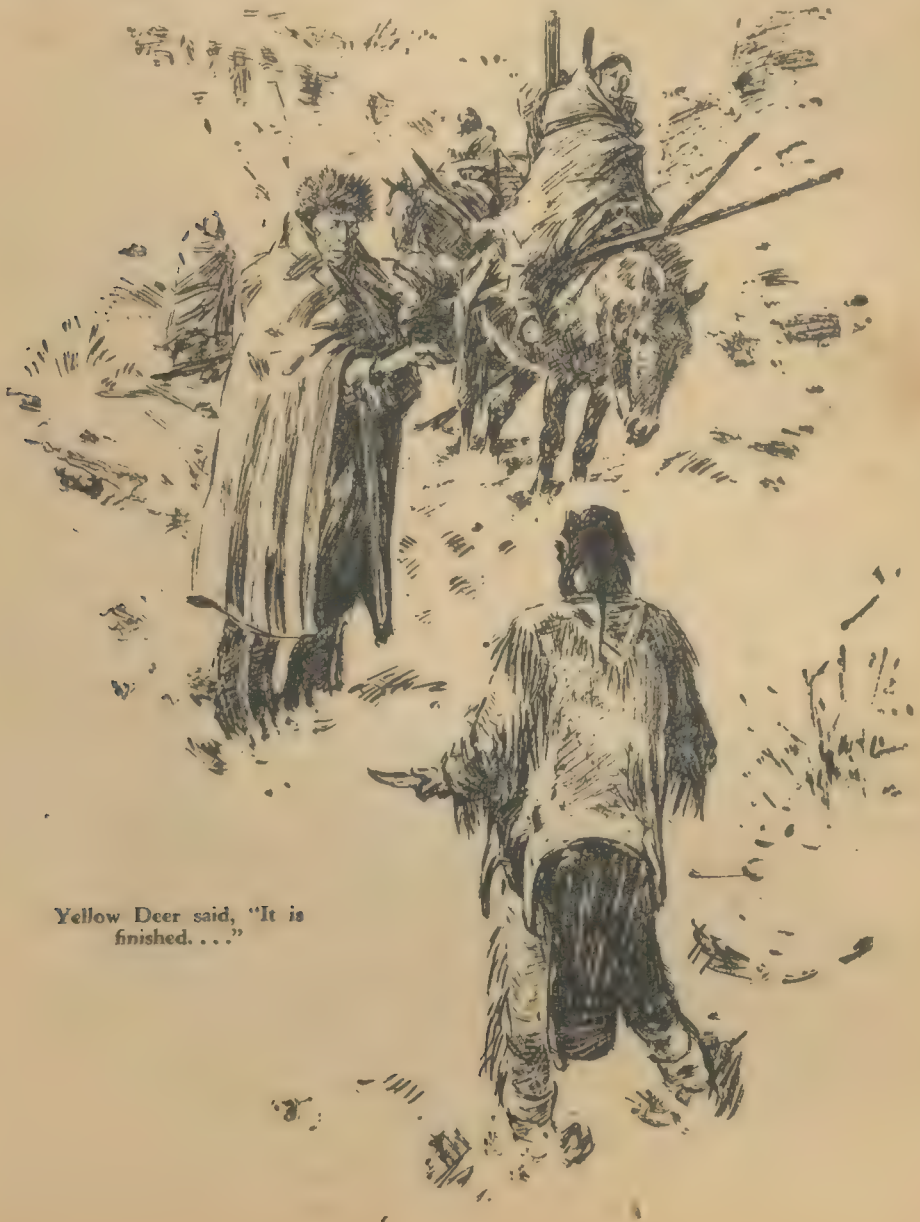
Fourteen years before, on the field of the Greasy Grass, Little Horn and Crazy Horse and Gall and some three thousand others had tried to protect that land for all time and rid it of the greedy invaders, and that day they had won. They had left Yellow Hair dead and five pony troops dead with him and they had almost left the fat Major Reno dead too. But more had come from the east, bringing shrapnel guns and Gatlings and . . . Fourteen years. Little Horn had been twenty summers old, then. Barstow had been a silver bar officer, what they called a first lieutenant. The story went around the lodge fires that this Barstow was an arrant coward with the heart of an old woman, a coward who had been observed creeping to cover, neglectful of his wounded; a coward who had knifed a three-stripe soldier in the night, then gutted out his intestines and choked the knifed man with them, to make it look like the work of an Indian. Little Horn had believed that story, and he still did. He had known Barstow a long time. The three-stripe soldier had seen Barstow creeping to cover, and would have reported that to Reno.

Major Barstow stopped cursing and

Sitting Bull lay newly-dead in his frozen grave, his warrior nation betrayed, defeated and scattered. Only Little Horn remained to exact his toll of bloody honor from the mighty pony soldiers—with a home-made lynx trap!

the pluming of his breath faded away. He snagged out a revolver and slammed two shots into the snow. Little Horn heard him rasp, "The sneaking red cur. We'll get him."

Little Horn smiled. He was impatient for them to go away so he could build his lynx trap and maybe catch a fine one and peddle the pelt across the Line in Canada. But he could smile, because in a way the pony soldiers amused him. They spoke revenge, in their camps along the Missouri. Revenge for Custer, revenge for the 7th Cavalry. This was the 7th Cavalry again, after fourteen years of waiting. It occurred to Little Horn that had the Ghost Dance been successful, the tribes would have had their revenge for a thou-



Yellow Deer said, "It is finished. . . ."

sand depredations by these scheming treaty-breakers.

"Little Horn!" The major's brass bellow echoed through the timber. "If you can hear me, come to camp at Wounded Knee Creek. You will be treated well. You will be fed and made warm!"

THE major holstered his revolver, made a sign to the others, and led the way back in their own staggered tracks. Presently they were out of sight, and Little Horn rose from the snow and began searching for proper limbs for his trap. He clambered carefully down the slippery rocks into the hundred-foot deep ravine, sprang through the current and hauled himself up the other side. He stood where Barstow had been standing ten minutes before. There were some fine, supple limbs there, and he seized one, tested it for resiliency, and began hacking at it with his knife.

He was almost finished with his trap when he saw Yellow Deer. Yellow Deer was not alone, his wife and his children were trailing him, portaging his camp for him; and when he saw Little Horn he held out a hand and came forward without them.

"Food trap?" Yellow Deer asked. He looked hungry; he was hungry.

"Pelt." Little Horn set the bait and looped the trigger on an unbroken place in the snow. When the lynx came to the stream to pick its way to water, it would step into the tripper, spring the overhead limbs, and be flung helpless over the rim of the ravine. Its weight would break the trigger limb and it would fall a hundred feet to painless death.

"You camp?"

Little Horn shook his head. "Not here. The soldiers were here."

"I saw the tracks. I heard them call." He regarded Little Horn gravely. "You go in?"

"To Wounded Knee?" Little Horn started rubbing a chunk of frozen rabbit meat around the trigger loop, both to smooth the snow and obliterate the man-scent. "I don't know. He offers food and shelter."

"On the reservation."

"That's the trouble." A picture of endless prairies and grassy savannas and summer-long hunts flashed across Little Horn's mind. He suppressed it, and considered the present. "Standing Rock?" They looked at each other. Standing Rock was where Sitting Bull had been murdered. The soldiers said he had started the Ghost Dance, when actually he had been in jail. They were taking him from jail to a conference when they blew a hole into his head and buried him quickly.

Yellow Deer shrugged. "I have a family. I cannot commit them to wandering the woods all winter, that would be false pride. Sitting Bull was shot by mistake anyway." Yellow Deer sounded as if he was trying to convince himself.

They walked away from the neatly-hidden trap, its trigger loop concealed under a film of snow. "Mistake?"

"Someone got nervous, and thought he made a false move, so they shot him."

"Nervous?" Little Horn was weighing several things—a winter in the woods against a winter of warmth; a winter of sleepful nights against a winter of sleeplessness caused by the fear of raiding soldiers who might kill him, alone in the timber. Too, if he went in, he might get himself a wife. He'd had a wife once, a fine young squaw, but she'd died after the Custer fight, when the man Mackenzie was chasing them through the snows of November.

They came to Yellow Deer's squaw and children and lodge poles. Yellow Deer said, "It is finished. It is a ghost trap. We tried to trap ourselves into thinking a Messiah would return, and give us ghost shirts and make us invulnerable to

white men's bullets. But it was not so. Now, they trap us." He shrugged again. "It is his land, now. He stole it, he will keep it."

Little Horn said, "Barstow is there."

"I know. I heard his voice. He is from that 7th, as they call it. He shouted that the 6th is coming." Yellow Deer looked sad. He looked at his tired wife, at his starved children. "You see? Always more come. Two regiments . . . what can we do? It would not be a fair fight if we stood against them. And we have no leader now."

"What you say is true." Little Horn shivered in his icy buckskins, and wished he had gloves and a bonnet. His only weapon was a knife. His rifle had been taken the summer before, as had the rifles of all of them, after the great Sitting Bull had given himself up. "What ornament is that?"

Yellow Deer smiled. "The child's?" He bent and fingered the bit of metal that hung from his son's armlet. "From a Springfield. The bolt, they call it. I painted it, so the soldiers wouldn't know."

His squaw spoke for the first time. "It was for the coming of the Messiah. We broke apart the rifles the soldiers did not find, and gave each woman and child a small part. If the Messiah had come, we would have re-assembled the rifles and fought."

"But He did not come." Little Horn cocked his head and listened to the woods, and heard nothing but the tumbling of the wind in the upper branches and the rustle of drifting snow, and from the ravine, the chuckle of water in the sluice. He heard no drums, nor incantations, nor beseechings. Suddenly he was very lonely. "Yellow Deer, I think I will come with you, and listen to the white man. It will be a long winter, up here all alone."

"You could go to Canada. It is only a few short marches from here."

Little Horn stiffened. "My ancestors are buried here, as are yours! I stay until I am driven out!"

THEY tracked south through the timber passes, Little Horn leading. They eased their way through the drifts and out of the heavy timber, and by midday were standing over Wounded Knee Creek, staring dully at its dark loops in the snow; eyeing the symmetrical rows of tents at the east end, where the soldiers were camped. The tepees of the strays who had come in this far were between the sides of a bend in the creek. Smoke hung straight up, the thin gray smoke of smouldering fires.

Major Barstow stroked the ends of his glossy mustaches. "Have you travois? What are you toting?"

Yellow Deer pointed to his wife. "We bring a camp. My friend has nothing."

"Damned good for him." The major looked at Little Horn. "Decided to give up the ghost, eh?" He laughed roughly. He rose from his rickety desk and walked past the corporal and past the two men with cocked carbines and walked up to Little Horn and belted him across the mouth with a glove. Then he brought the glove back and smacked him again. "That's for 1876, you goddamned killer!"

Little Horn licked blood from his lips, shaking, trembling; insane, for a moment. He fought for calmness, and found it, and let the rage howl away down to the deep places in him. He glanced at the corporal and the two men and the three cocked carbines; he sniffed, and smelled whiskey and sweaty woollens, two marks of the white man. It was hot, here in the tent.

"Don't try any tricks," Barstow warned them. "This is the 7th Cavalry—or part of it. But you're still out-numbered. And the 6th Cavalry's on its way up the river. We leave tomorrow for Standing Rock." He drew the glove back again, then lowered it. The light in Little

Horn's eyes was like the splinter of moonlight on a bayonet. "Go into camp on the bend!"

* * *

Little Horn accepted Yellow Deer's invitation to share the tepee. There was nothing else for him to do. He thought of his abandoned trap in the hills, and dismissed it from his mind. A lynx, or some animal, might trip into it; but death would be painless and quick. Might trip into it. He doubted it, really. The trap had been a challenge to loneliness, something to do, something to think about. The game trail was the only logical place for it, but too many humans had scented the snow, and no animal would go near it. The bait meat had been frozen. He should have warmed it first. He hadn't thought of that; only a very hungry animal would dare to go near it.

A scraping sounded on the tepee's flap, and Yellow Deer grunted a welcome.

An old man ducked in and let the flap fall behind him. His hair hung in white braids and his blanket was ragged and patched. He nodded briefly. "Two more men."

This visitor was respectfully seated and handed a pipe.

"We had to," Yellow Deer told him miserably.

The old man sucked smoke and nodded once more. "I know . . . I know." From east of the tepees a trumpet sounded. "They feed now." He gazed at the bowl of the pipe. "Do we?" He let the question hang a moment. "No! We scrabble, we dig, we live like beasts!" He handed the pipe around, ignoring the woman. Yellow Deer inhaled a searing lungful and passed it to Little Horn. Little Horn performed the rite and returned the pipe to the old man.

"They surround our camp?"

Th old man smiled, and his wrinkled skin broke into a hundred creases. "At night they do. They fear we will desert. Tell me—where will we desert to?" He was a very old man who had seen many things and whose logic was the logic of objectivity. It was as if he had almost ceased to participate in living affairs. He was chief of the warriors' council of the Minniconjou Sioux, and respected for his opinions.

He told them, "I have been here for several suns, I had to come in, and ask for sustenance. My sons had to, and their wives, and the warriors. A few short years ago we were masters of our rightful lands, and now we must beg for the right to live on here. Were I younger. . . ." He stopped speaking, afraid of the effect his words might have on these young men. He had made an agreement with the pony soldiers, and he was a man who kept his word. Which was more than could be said for the pony soldiers and those who came behind them. "What is this? The white man's Year of 1890, and in a few hours it will be the birthday of his Christ, his Messiah." He puffed several times. "In a few more years, there will be no Indians, and the memory of the Indians' Messiah will be locked forever in the grave of Sitting Bull." He took the pipestem in both thin hands and snapped it in two. "Courage, my sons." He rose quickly, for his years, and drew his blanket high to his chin. "Patience."

When he had gone, Little Horn retrieved one end of the pipestem and thrust it into his warming shirt. He gave the other to Yellow Deer. "Talismans, friend."

A name was called from outside, and Yellow Deer's woman went out into the darkness. The two men sat in silence until she returned; Little Horn tongued his split lips, and fingered the pipestem, and thought long about the end of a nation, the defeat of a people, the finish of a way of life.

The woman came back, walking stiffly.

She carefully adjusted the flap, looked all around her, then triumphantly bared the rifle.

Yellow Deer was on his feet, eyes flashing. He seized the weapon and weighed it and turned it over and felt its cool smoothness. "From where, woman?"

"The soldiers did not search the squaws, as they came in. There are almost four of these to each lodge, though we, coming in latest, have only one."

"What do we do?" Little Horn asked.

"The word is that we will fight if the soldiers want fight."

The men looked swiftly at each other. "Will they?"

"Force a fight? They might."

Little Horn said, "They forced death on Sitting Bull. They might try it on us."

"They will try anything!" Yellow Deer's words were savage.

Little Horn took the rifle. "Painted parts. From ornaments." He handed it to Yellow Deer. "Hide it well, friend. Tomorrow, let your woman secret it on her person. It has ammunition, all it requires further is a brave hand."

REVEILLE'S brass file scratched the dawn-dark skies from the camp to eastward.

Fires came to life and licked at the darkness; cook pots simmered, and both camps prepared to fold, pack and stand by to move. It would be the last journey for the tepee camp, the last trail from the life they would never know again on the face of this earth.

Squaws moved awkwardly in the firelight, unable to sag or bend too far because of their metallic burdens. Braves stood silently, quivering slightly in the frosty air, hardly seeming to notice one another. Gray light sallowed the purple skies and showed pony soldiers around the tepees. They were afoot, standing to bridles, and they had been posted on each side of the creek. On a knoll to the east, a Gatling's ugly snouts showed from behind a snow-heavy bush. Some horsemen trotted toward the tepees from the soldiers' camp, fur-hatted and gloved. Their breaths shot ahead of them as they came.

Major Barstow reined in by Yellow Deer's tepee and squinted through the grayness at Little Horn. "Come up here, you."

Little Horn stopped ten feet from the major's stirrup. He was not risking a kick or a quirting, but not because of physical pain. He did not trust his temper.

"Search this one, Corporal."

While the corporal clapped questing hands over his body, Little Horn noticed other groups of horsemen stopping by other tepees and conducting similar searchings. There was no animal equipment to be probed, nor ponies to be examined. The Indians had been dismounted for months, in consequence of Nelson Miles' order that if they had no ponies they had no place to go. The Indian would walk for the rest of his existence.

More soldiers came down from their camp, and some went beyond the knoll where the Gatling was and started setting-up a mortar. Barstow was taking no chances.

The corporal finished with Little Horn and grabbed Yellow Deer.

"I hope your feet won't hurt too much," the major told Little Horn. "You haven't moccasins."

Little Horn was wearing bound sacking; his moccasins had fallen off months before, and it was hard to fashion new ones in winter's restless lash.

"I can walk," he said.

"You will walk!" Barstow laughed. He still smelled of whiskey. "You'll walk ahead of me, ahead of my horse, and if you so much as breathe too deeply, I'll have you dragged." He coughed harshly. "Like travois." He laughed again.

Fourteen years. . . . Little Horn bit his

fingernails into his palms and shuddered. He wondered if the soldiers would force a fight.

He hoped that they would.

The knife blade was sharp between his buttocks and he could seize it and throw it in less time than it takes to inhale. It would look fine, planted to the hilt in Barstow's breastbone. It had been Barstow, the women had told him fourteen years ago, who had ordered the bodies thrown on the cremation fires that horrible November night. Little Horn's wife's body had been tossed on the top, and he hadn't been able to bury her decently.

The tepees were struck and rolled and wrapped; fires were buried, travois rigged. The major ordered the squaws forward—all of them. He was still taking no chances. Little Horn saw Jaquata and her mother and her sisters step away from her grandfather, the chief of the warrior council. Jaquata was young and smooth-skinned and bright of eye; she lowered her eyes from Barstow's fleshy smile, and Little Horn had an impulse to kill him and end the whole thing, right there and then. But he didn't, he waited silently, like the rest, feeling the tension pulse through his people and himself and the soldiers, too. They were coming closer; the *slick-slack* of a bolt being opened was loud on the still gray air.

"Search the squaws!"

LITTLE HORN edged his right hand behind him and slipped his fingers into his leggings. It would have to be quick, if it happened at all. Quick and sure and final. He ran an eye over his people, standing so dumbly in the knife-thin morning haze. There were less than a hundred, and the pony soldiers numbered three times as many, with more on the way.

A squad of them stepped toward the squaws. Jaquata folded her arms and snapped a remark at a slope-shouldered sergeant and he stopped in his tracks.

Little Horn smiled. She was a fine young woman, that Jaquata.

"Search 'em, goddamit!"

The sergeant stepped forward again and Jaquata swatted his reaching wrists and sent him back. He put his stung hands on his hips and stared at her. Without moving his eyes, he lowered one hand to his holster, thumbed open the flap, and lifted out his service Colt. He cocked it, leveled it, and held it on her.

Little Horn's right hand came to the knife hilt and closed on it.

"No!" Four hundred faces turned to the old man. "You do not touch her!"

Major Barstow spurred past the grouped squaws and rode up to the old man and raised a shot-filled quirt and lowered it and left the old man lying in the snow.

The major circled and came back and tightened rein by Little Horn. "What have you got?"

Little Horn drew the pipe stem from his shirt. "This." Scorn raced across his eyes as he added, "May I keep it?"

Barstow judged him a moment, then spurred on to his position. "Search 'em!"

The squad advanced on the squaws once more, and that was when Jaquata ripped open her raveled blanket and tugged at the carbine and sang in the 'Conjou tongue: "Drive them out!"

The sergeant snapped up the revolver and Little Horn's knife took him in the forearm and spun him into the snow. A trooper behind him fired twice from the hip and one of Jaquata's sisters folded forward and sank to her face, trembling.

Three seconds passed. The shock-heavy silence was a living thing. Four seconds.

Then a wail of unbelief and rage rose from the warriors, and Little Horn knew that the old man was dead. A shot rang from the cluster of squaws and the trooper behind the wounded sergeant sat down

suddenly, quick surprise on his heavy face.

The morning exploded in the crash of carbines and the jouncing impact of shrapnel. A confusion of figures darted through the swirling smoke and rifles appeared and throats broke apart and Little Horn heard Yellow Deer shout: "The ghost trap!" And saw him flop backward and die.

Little Horn seized his rifle and dove to one knee and traced Barstow's galloping person and wasted two bullets on him. The major was gone to eastward, waving his arm and yelling something nobody heard. The women were running toward the creek, flinging rifles to their men; Little Horn dodged through whistling bullets and got hold of Jaquata and forced her behind some bushes and held her there a moment. "You leave quickly now!" he gasped. "Go up to Punished Man's heart waters with your family!"

He released her and raced across the smoke tatters and found the chaos that had been a camp at peace.

RAWLY-TORN bodies lay reddening the trampled snow, limbs grotesque in the brittle yellow daylight; warriors ran rabbit-like to escape the belching blast of shrapnel and the persistent bite of the Gatling that chewed the snow and snapped at a man's legs and lanced him in half. Its *chack-chack-chack* was a monotonous alto dirge above the irregular slap of carbines. A mortar shell blew mud and snow and blood and bits of flesh into the sunshine; a man hoarsed a command and the pony soldiers started forming by the creek.

Little Horn pumped two shots at them and leapt to his feet. "They rush!" It was no use, Yellow Deer had been right; they could not stand, ever again. "To the hills —all of you!" A few scrambled past bushes and sought the creek and the dubious safety of the timber, but most trudged abjectly toward the formed soldiers, hands out, palms forward.

Little Horn threw down the empty rifle and slogged toward the waiting soldiers, hands forward; gradually, he fell away to the left, to the west bend of the creek. Before anyone could see him do it, he'd dashed across the ice and thrown himself into the white rocks and was gone timberward. A spatter of firing followed him into the trees and the shots sliced the limbs and one bullet rapped a tree trunk. But Little Horn was away, one damp hand clutching the talisman tightly.

He heard a trumpet.

He stopped, lungs afire with the effort of breathing, mouth sand-dry. There were tracks in the snow, and wind-shoved flakes were sifting into them, filling the prints, erasing them from the land forever. Little Horn waited, bare hands out, unarmed, defiant, willing at last to die where he had lived. But there was no pursuit; the pony soldiers were busy with the others, rounding them up, ranking them off. A shot punched the distances.

. . . That was for a wounded Indian, Little Horn reflected. He turned into the timber, concluding that it was perhaps the better way, instead of a life of bondage.

Another shot sounded, more dimly this time; and for several minutes, as he struggled upward into the hills, the shots counted the wounded.

He sat near Punished Woman's, where it rushed openly from the high country; he palmed snow into his mouth greedily, listening for pursuit. Barstow wouldn't let him get away if he could help it. But Barstow could not know that he had gotten away, after that wild ride away from the firing.

They'd tell him, though. They'd tell the major that his favorite Indian was gone, was not among the dead or wounded, which were the same thing, now. And Barstow would follow him all the way to Canada, if he had to.

Little Horn got up and started north

again; he had not stepped ten paces before he heard the voices. They were clear on the still, cold air, and they came from below him. Crunching sounds echoed upward, and Little Horn back-tracked until he could see the horses. They were having hard going, and finally the riders dismounted. Barstow he recognized, but the others were strangers.

". . . in at the finish," the major was saying.

These strangers, then, had arrived as the shooting started, which may have been why Barstow galloped off. The white man's Messiah takes care of knaves and cowards. Little Horn spoke the words to himself. Then he noticed that the strangers wore different numerals than did the pony soldiers from the 7th; these new ones had metal 6s on their hats.

"But there's one I must capture, so I can kill him as he tries to escape." The major's laughter crackled through the trees. He was within three hundred yards of Little Horn, now; Little Horn could discern the wide cheeks and thick, short nose and trap-tight mouth of a silver bar officer just behind Barstow. "Name's Little Horn, Mr. Pershing, though you in the 6th probably haven't met him."

They were coming closer, and Little Horn plunged up the course of Punished Woman's, up to where it narrowed into the ravine leading to its heart waters. That's where Jaquata would be waiting for him.

HE GAINED on the men who stalked him; he knew the woods and he knew his strength and he employed it as well as he could. He hoped something would be in the ravine, cast there by his spring-trap. Something to eat.

He neared the game trail and found Jaquata there, alone and shivering and fearsome for him.

"We must hurry. They come fast."

"Canada?"

"Yes." He guided her around the trap, which was unsprung. He helped her into the ravine's steep depths and took her across the current to the north side.

She faced him. "Little Horn, our trail is like that of a caravan. There is not time to cover it?"

A shot hammered the silence.

"Come, my woman." He followed her north away from the ravine, heading for Canada.

She paused and turned, frowning. "Little Horn—"

"Wait, then, if you wish. Wait a moment and listen." They knelt in the snow, and presently they heard Barstow shout, "Don't walk in their tracks! They'll lead you into something!" The major plodded beast-like toward the ravine, seeking the smoothed surface of the game trail.

He was coming first, lynx-like eyes eager for another shot, a larger target. He was grinning when his left boot tripped the trigger loop and catapulted him upward, dangling and turning and screaming; a second later the top limb cracked under his weight and buckled and dropped him screaming into the ravine.

They heard his body strike.

The ones behind him, the ones with the metal 6s on their hats, stood and stared downward in complete awe.

Little Horn rose and helped Jaquata to her feet and guided her north.

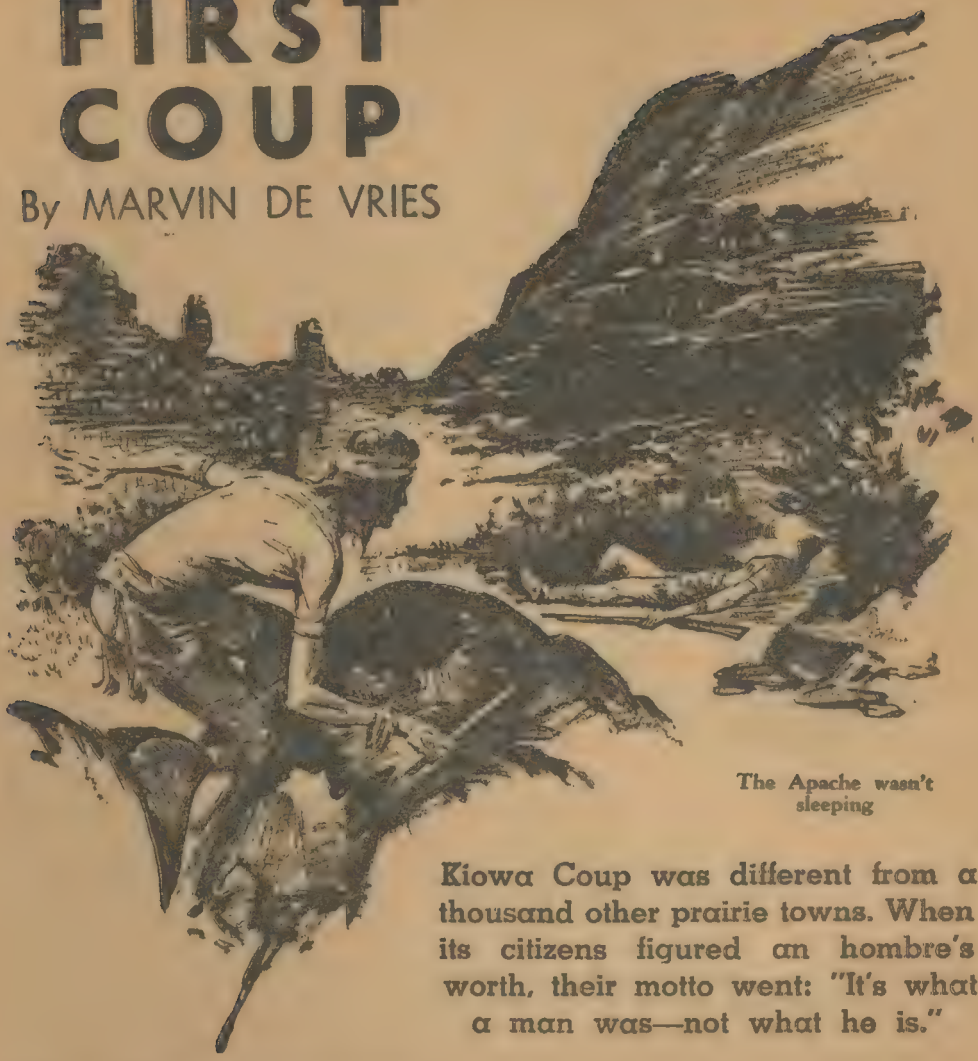
There was no more pursuit, they walked alone in the woods. Only a jay saw them pass, and it scolded them shrilly.

Little Horn smiled. "You berate us, if you wish. No one heeds your warning."

"You are a good hunter," Jaquata said, and smiled back at him and turned to him and placed her cheek against his, before she faced north again and went on through the hills that never again would throb to a drum.

FIRST COUP

By MARVIN DE VRIES



The Apache wasn't sleeping

Kiowa Coup was different from a thousand other prairie towns. When its citizens figured an hombre's worth, their motto went: "It's what a man was—not what he is."

THE Texas Northern "flyer," a mixed train of stock cars and passenger coaches, bustled into the sudden shadows of Donner's Draw and began to slow. The conductor came into our coach calling the name of the town we were approaching and the dusty passengers grinned aimiably because they thought the name odd. The man sitting next to me remarked, "What won't they think up next?"

"I was born here, friend," I said with considerable heat. "What do you think's wrong with it?"

The man looked as if he'd swallowed a dead horse and stumbled through an apology. "I—I guess it's all right."

"I guess so," I told him, and looked out the window.

I used to ride through this draw on my buckskin back and forth to town when I was a boy, but that was long ago, before we even thought of a railroad. I know all this country. I knew the town and the people in it. I knew Charlie Darkhorse, and had heard his story about the Kiowa boy who stalked the sleeping Lipan Apache from the hill behind the town.

This was the place where I was born and lived out my youth, and where the railroad came at last and put up a Danger Crossing sign at the crossroad. I knew Buck Avery, who rode into town the day the sign was put up and pretended to make a big fuss about it. He said it took more gall than he could stomach. "What do you think of an outfit that would push a name like that down our throats?" he remarked, lighting down at Henry Tommey's blacksmith shop that morning. "Danger Crossing! Of all the cock-eyed names!"

Tommy stopped his hammering and took a quick eye-plumb along the handle of the red-hot V 2 stamp iron he was straightening. "What in hell you growlin' about, Buck?"

"Our new name, for God's sake!" Buck snapped. "We're Danger Crossing now. No more Kiowa Coup. Can you beat that"

"Come off."

"There's a sign up by the depot, Hank. Go take a look."

"Well," Tommey said, as though he would have something important to say about the matter as soon as he had a little time. "Well?"

Buck wanted his horse shod, but knew Tommey wouldn't start work until he'd finished the branding iron. Tommey claimed it frayed his nerves to jump from one thing to another. Buck tied his horse at the two-by-four, cribbed almost to nothing by impatient animals, and the men perched along the work-bench made waiting room for him.

Buck always wore a gun, and was supposed to be an ex-outlaw, but those days were past, and he was a welcome man because of his sly talk. He saw that most of them knew what the sign meant, and that the railroad was innocent of any high-handed intentions, but they looked inclined to go along with his levity. All except Charlie Darkhorse, a half-breed Indian, who sat on a nail keg near the door and gave this small talk no heed whatever because he was absorbed in some private worry of his own. And, of course, Haw Gunthershot, a pompous, humorless man, who had no time for blowing these harmless bubbles, and broke it up immediately. "They put up the sign so nobody would get run over, that's all," he stated bluntly. "Any fool knows that."

"Do tell!" Buck exclaimed.

"Naming a town like this is up to the post-office department," Gunthershot went on, authoritatively. "Ain't that so, Charlie?"

Charlie Darkhorse, the new half-breed post master, agreed with a glum nod of his head.

GUNTHERSHOT owned the local mercantile and had political influence in the district. Tipped off by political friends, he had bought right-of-way property before anyone else knew a railroad was coming through, and had made a fair-sized fortune. He was ambitious and cunning, seldom wasted his time loafing at the blacksmith shop, except when the political pot was boiling.

This suited Tommey perfectly. He considered Gunthershot too foxy and crooked to abide. It was, however, Gunthershot's say-so that had gotten Kiowa Coup a post-office, and he had certainly had a hand in getting Charlie Darkhorse the appointment as postmaster. It was a surprising thing to do, in view of local attitude toward mixed blood, but Charlie was a remarkable man, and everyone approved the choice, especially now that Charlie was getting so old and needed some kind of work to see him through to the end.

"There's one thing sure," Gunthershot went on. "We got to get rid of that Kiowa Coup name. It sounds like we got a lot of Injuns crawling around in our hair. I can't do business with outsiders with a name like that. They think all we want

out here is beads and some fire water."

"Looks like I stepped into something," Buck Avery remarked with another wry grin. "Hell, I was just making some habla. Anyway, if it's up to you, Charlie, let's hear what you're going to call us."

"There's a way of going at these things," Gunthershot spoke up quickly. "We're supposed to pass around a petition to show what we want."

"Let's hear Charlie tell it, shall we?" Buck said.

Charlie Darkhorse had a slow way of speaking, but he had a good command of English and it sounded pleasant to the ear. "Usually," he started in, "the post-office department accepts the name the town has, if it isn't too much like a lot of other places. We don't have that trouble here, but the department understands there has been some talk of changing the name—" he cleared his throat and glanced briefly at Gunthershot, "—there's been some talk like that, and I must let them know what we want. It's up to all of you —of us. I have a petition to pass around."

"Anything you say, Charlie," Buck said. "I guess we all feel that way, don't we, boys?"

They all agreed with a quiet mumble of good-will, and Charlie must have hugged it to his heart. There had been times in his life when all the good-will he could have mustered anywhere would have hung him to a tree. In his younger days he had been a meat hunter for the Bents, working out of Bent's Fort. He had scouted for Custer on the Washita. Indians and whites alike trusted him. Once, Man-Afraid-Of-His-Horses, the big Kiowa Chief, who was kicking up a lot of trouble, took his given word that he could safely come in to parley with his white enemies.

But it had been a trick, and the Kiowa Chief was put in chains. Because he had given his word, Charlie Darkhorse helped him escape, and, in consequence, became a hunted man himself. After that, he rode down the years with Yellow Foot's Kiowas. But now, once again, he sat and talked with white men, and had won their enduring regard. This appointment Gunthershot had managed for him must have been a God-send, because he had come to know the feel of hunger and destitution, with a cast-off shirt on his back, and mismatched shoes on his feet. But he prob-

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ably didn't feel much gratitude, because he knew Gunthershot meant to use him, as he had been used before. And now was the time.

"Let's hear it, Charlie," Buck Avery prodded again. "Come to think of it, Kiowa Coup does sound kind of funny. Strangers would think so at any rate."

CHARLIE DARKHORSE was still slow to speak up, so Haw Gunthershot blurted out, "It's a petition to name the town after me. Charlie thought it would be a nice idea, because I got him the job, and so on."

"Oh," Buck said, running his tongue solemnly along his cheek, "I see." Fun wrinkles formed around his eyes again, and his lips curled around the clumsy name, giving it a silent trial. "Let's see now," he said slowly. "Gunthershotville? Gunthershotburg? Big Gunthershot? Gunthershot Junction? Holy Smokes! Well, let's hear it, Charlie?"

"Now just a minute," Henry Tommey spoke up. "I can't spell Kiowa Coup. How am I goin' to get along with a jaw-breaker like Gunthershotville, or something like that. It takes half a dictionary."

"You're too dumb to spell 'cat'," Gunthershot flared.

Buck Avery speculated a moment, and turned sober. He saw now exactly why Haw had gotten this appointment for Charlie. It was a piece of cunning to satisfy a small man's vanity. Gunthershot wanted this feather in his hat, and had maneuvered Charlie into a position where he was obliged to dance to Haw's tune. The town-folk would fall in line because they were kindly and indulgent and wanted Charlie to keep his place. "All right, Charlie," Buck said, "let's have the petition. You've got my name. And everybody else's here, I reckon. Is that right?"

"Yeah," Tommey grumbled, and the rest joined in.

Charlie still hesitated, letting his eyes slide along his lean frame, clear down to the mis-matched shoes he still wore, settling at last on the deep dark hue of his hands, seeing there, perhaps most of all, the uses to which these things could be put by a cunning man. He glanced at Buck and gave him gentle thanks with his eyes, but he kept the petition in his pocket.

"As you all know," he said finally, "when an Indian comes to manhood, he finds a fitting name for himself, and so it is with names on the land. There is something to fit each place, and someone will find it and put it there. I will tell you how it was with this place." His eyes lifted, and the sight of far places and old times came back. He glanced outside, and his eyes raced up the hill behind the town. He pointed a long brown finger.

"Look up there," he told them. "Look hard, and you will see Yellow Foot and his Kiowas sitting up there in the sun. I am there, too, because this was the time I rode with them. A foolish Lipan Apache is down here on this very spot where a juniper grows"—he made the bush take shape before their eyes with a round sweep of his hands—"and he is resting in the shade. He is all alone. We watch him a long time. His hand is lifted over his eyes to keep out the sun. His other hand is thrown out, and holds a rifle. We talk about him and his folly, and move behind the hill-top so he cannot see. He is our enemy, and we argue who will go down through the grass and count first coup on this foolish one.

"Yellow Foot has a son, a stripling boy, who has never counted coup before, but he wins the right to try by laying down the greatest hazard. He will go down there without his weapons, and touch the sleeping Apache with his naked coup stick. No one will match the hazard, and so he wins the right."

Charlie Darkhorse pointed to the floor

again, to show exactly where the Apache lay. He was a good story-teller, and it was his nature and his heritage to make a small drama of the ending. He crouched a little, and stretched out his hand as though he held a coup stick in his fist. He held it so a moment, and while he stood there blank dismay slowly seeped across his face; his shoulders slumped; his hands dropped limply to his sides. The Lipan Apache wasn't sleeping there in the shade of the juniper bush. He was stone dead, and what was to have been this boy's triumph turned to ashes.

Charlie Darkhorse got to his feet as the boy had done, shading his eyes against an imaginary sun. "He looks at us up there," he went on, "and a man who would not risk the half of what this boy had sends a jeering laugh down the hill. I turn and hit him across the face, and say the boy could have been no braver if the Apache had been alive. I said it was his bravery that counted, and that it was a first coup, and like we did for first coup, it would put a straight-up feather in his hair.

"He had done a big thing, and he had the right to first coup. That is the same as we are talking about here, giving this place a name. But the boy is shamed. He cannot come back up the hill, and, while we watch, he stoops and reaches for the Apache's blade and drives it straight into his own young heart. But his courage remains and that is why this place is called Kiowa Coup. I named it so myself."

Darkhorse walked outside.

"That petition, Charlie," Haw Gunthershot bellowed, his voice bulging with anger. "Come back with that petition."

Charlie didn't stop, and Buck Avery held up his hand. "Let him go, Haw," he said, his voice surprisingly mild. "When we want a petition we'll dig one up." Then he gave his holster a sudden sharp whack with the flat of his hand, and his voice, ominous with fury, snapped like the shot of a gun. "And don't bother him. Don't let me ever catch you bothering him again or I'll give you some of this. I'll draw up a petition!"

The "Flyer," a mis-nomer if there ever was one, squealed to a stop, and the conductor called the name of the town again: "Darkhorse! Darkhorse!"

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SMASHING NOVEL

By

ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY

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After a thousand trail-weary miles, Clay Braden brought his fortune-on-the-hoof home to Oregon. Home, where the "friends" who'd backed his venture to far-off Texas—waited to back him to his grave!

POWDERSMOKE EMPIRE

They came abruptly in sight of the ranchhouse

HIS rugged frame gaunted by hardship, his eyes narrowed and bloodshot, Clay Braden stared ahead at the lifting line of the Blue Hills which he had left more than six months before. Home again! He tried to thrill to that familiar sight as he had thought he would

—but he couldn't. Some strange warning was plucking at Clay Braden.

Puzzled by the feeling which he could not shake off, he turned grimly in his saddle to watch the cattle drifting by. Week after weary week on the trail had graven that sight on his mind—dust boiling up from under gritty, grayed bellies, cloven hoofs chopping ceaselessly at the earth, a sea of rhythmically moving shoulders and spiky horns.

Clay Braden had brought them back as he had said he would—three thousand Texas longhorns—to stock the new range that was Oregon. Thought of the torturing strain of that drive, with its stampedes, its perilous river crossings, its thirsty stretches and its hellish monotony, ran through in his mind as he constructed again the vision which had urged him to it. It was a vision of the Blue Basin range filled to overflowing with the fat cattle its lushly-grassed valleys could feed so well. It was the dream of a cattleman who has found in the remote frontier a land to be conquered and turned to profit.

In the shelter of those towering Blue Hills lay Clay Braden's little Rocking B outfit. Home! Anticipation glowed warmly in his veins. He wanted to see these sorely-needed cattle he had brought back with him from Texas flooding over his range; flooding, too, over the pastures of the neighboring outfits which had shared in the expense and the risk of the drive. He grinned faintly. And he wanted to see his kid brother again; no easy job for a kid—running an outfit, no matter how small, all by himself.

Some day, Clay Braden knew, the Blue Basin country would be a great cattle range. But now, with his goal all but won and his dream a reality, that warning premonition was pricking him.

Clay Braden believed in hunches, and played them when he got them. Now for the first time he wondered what might have happened in Blue Basin during the six wearisome months he had been gone.

From the point of the herd a horseman came spurring back along the brushgrown slope of the wash. It was Tex Harker, hard-bitten veteran of the cattle trails, Clay Braden's segundo. Like Clay, he was filmed with dust, bearded and hardened to a stringy, rawhide toughness.

Clay grinned as the man drew abreast. "Another day and we'll be out of the rough country, Tex. You'll be lookin' at range so good you'll want to eat it."

Tex Harker grunted. A man spare with words, he knew two things as he knew the palm of his hand—cattle and guns. "Yeah? They's riders comin', Clay. Three of 'em."

Clay looked sharply at his trail boss. He had come to read as much into Tex Harker's silence as he drew from his words. "Trouble, maybe?" he suggested quietly.

"Can't tell till it hits you. They been keepin' the glasses on us from yonder hill. Seen the light sparkle on 'em. Friends o' yours would uh come down sooner."

The shadow of a frown settled on Clay Braden's bronzed, good-looking face. The half-inch beard about his mouth obscured its firm line. "Hell," he said. "Trouble's over. The Injun country made you spooky, Tex. We're home now."

Harker spat without answering, and Clay added, "Think different, do you? Spread the word, then, and I'll look 'em over."

He urged his pony ahead over the route Harker had taken to reach him, and he wondered sharply if the vague warning he had felt had been a true one.

EVEN before he reached the three men he recognized the rider in the center. Clay had never hit it off with squat and surly Lee Marts. Of the half dozen Blue Basin ranchers who had joined Clay in his scheme to stock the range, Marts had been the most reluctant.

It had taken every dollar the meagre company of cattlemen could scrape together to finance that herd from Texas. Three dollars a head had been the buying price, and the expenses of the drive had been half again as much. A lot of money—when the chances were ten to one that Clay Braden would never get back into the shadow of the Blue Hills with the herd. But the Blue Basin ranchers wanted more cattle, wanted them badly enough to risk bankruptcy in order to get them.

Clay's weary, bloodshot eyes glinted. He was back now, and with the herd. Lee Marts had said he couldn't do it, but he had. Plodding at his heels were the cattle which would make the Blue Basin range a prosperous and strong one. He was bringing life blood to a new cattleland.

Marts' thick voice rumbled at him. "Howdy, Clay! Plumb glad to see you made 'er, boy. We caught your dust down yonder an' come ridin' hell-bent."

Clay Braden gripped the man's heavy fist. "Sure hell—part of it. Glad to be back." But his voice came coolly. He disliked Marts' heavy face with its pendulous jowls and thick black brows which shadowed peering eyes. There was a furtive cunning traced beneath his gross features. It was said that Lee Marts had fled to the Oregon frontier for reasons best known to himself. It was true that he considered himself too good a man to be wasted on primitive surroundings, which might have, in some measure, accounted for his surliness. He fancied himself a man of prestige and power who had been cheated of what he rightfully deserved.

"Reckon then," he chuckled, "you'll be right pleased to get a little help."

"We been makin' out," retorted Clay drily.

"Sure, I know that, but the herd's splittin' here. We decided to move half of it 'bout ten miles north of Nugget. Easier for—"

"Who decided?"

"Me an' Rankin an' Billy Doyle an' the rest. It'll be shorter that way for some of us. I'll take three-four of your riders an' push 'em north at Split-Tongue fork."

"Nobody's splittin' this herd till we get to Nugget," said Clay calmly. "That's what I said I'd do, and that's what I'm doin'."

The forced geniality drained out of Lee Marts' voice. "What the hell do you mean by that?" he snapped. "Gettin' damned high-handed, ain't you?" He settled his squat frame in the saddle, and Clay Braden noticed that his two companions, strangers both of them, were circling a little and shifting their hands.

The arrival of the point riders cut off the incipient hostility. With them was the grizzled, cool-eyed Tex Harker. A lean, saddle-toughened crew they made, dangerous as loose fire, nerves keyed to the hair-trigger by the rigors of the long drive.

Harker, catching the tension between Clay and Marts, drawled, "Them three boxes we got labeled 'prunes,' you know, Clay? Opened one, an' damn if they ain't shells—good .45 shells."

Clay appeared not to hear. "Nothin' high-handed about it," he told Marts. "All this stuff goes straight through to Nugget, that's all."

"Think I'm figgerin' to crook you?" sneered Marts.

Clay shrugged. "The man that does'll have his hands full."

Scowling, Lee Marts flung his horse around as the lead steers came rumbling at them. "You get proddy damned fast, seems to me. Don't forget some of the rest of us got as much say in this thing as you have."

They bedded the herd down without water that night. The badlands to the east of the little town of Nugget were rugged and broken, and for the most part dry. Though Lee Marts and his two men remained, they had little more to say. They

ate supper sullenly, and when it was done they spread their bed-rolls in a shallow canyon some distance removed from the trail crew.

IT WAS still an hour before dawn when Clay Braden felt a hand gripping his shoulder. He stirred, looked up, awake instantly. Tex Harker was bending over him, a silhouetted shadow against the star-dappled night sky.

"Your friends skipped out 'bout an hour back," murmured Tex briefly. "Seen 'em slide past the herd, headin' into town."

"The hell," said Clay, and sat up. Pulling on his boots, he strode to the fire and tossed on some brush from the cut pile beside it. It was true. The leaping flames revealed only barren ground where the three men had turned in.

"If you'd ask me, which you ain't," stated Tex flatly, "somethin's rotten in this set-up."

"If you saw somethin' I didn't, spit it out."

"Cripes! You ain't blind. If I hadn't rode up when I did this afternoon, that gent would uh been puttin' lead through your gizzard. An' him a pardner in this, you tell me."

"He'd have *tried,* maybe," Clay answered. His head jerked up as the faint sound of hoofbeats drifted to him. Tex had heard it, too. His keen eyes were probing into the starlit dimness which blurred the outlines of canyon wall and hill slope.

A rider took form, advancing at a walk toward the beacon of the fire. A man was leaning over the saddle-horn, peering ahead, and his voice rang out querulously. "Clay! Clay Braden here?"

Clay started as if the voice had been a shaft. Then he jumped forward and tugged the newcomer down from the saddle. "Uncle Billy, by all that's holy! Climb down, damn your ornery hide. God, it's good to see a man from here again. What the hell you doin' this far away from your home range?"

"Quit spurrin' me," croaked the old man. He peered across the fire at Tex. "Who's this you got with you?"

Clay grinned. "Trail boss, Uncle. Tex Harker. Tex, this here is Uncle Billy Malone; he's burnt more government powder on bad Injuns than any other man alive."

For a moment the two old-timers stared at each other. Though neither spoke, some indefinable force in each of them met in acknowledgment and acceptance as their glances locked. Then Uncle Billy turned brusquely back to Clay. "It's bad news I'm bringing ye, boy. Come daylight, turn these cows around and head 'em back out of here. There ain't no place for 'em in Blue Basin."

His words might have been a bombshell hurled suddenly and without warning into the open space by the fire. In the sharp, painful silence which followed, Uncle Billy Malone stood stiff and erect. The dancing flames colored his fringed and beaded buckskin jacket, touched the graying hair which fell to his shoulders from beneath the battered hat with the brim turned up in front. Lanes of reflected light darted along the lengthy barrel of the Sharps buffalo rifle he gripped in his right hand. His leathery face, seamed and mustached, appeared incredibly old.

"You drunk?" demanded Clay hoarsely.

"I'd give a heap if I was," Uncle Billy snapped. "Hell's spooked and stompeded in Blue Basin while you been gone, Clay. I come out to tell you. Come daylight—"

"Come daylight this herd's goin' in to Nugget," said Clay harshly, "like I planned."

"You'll change your mind, boy. You ain't got the chance of a rabbit among wolves. They'll burn you down and take the cattle."

With lean fingers that he fought to keep

from quivering, Clay Braden started to roll a smoke. He swallowed once before he said, "Leave that part of it, Uncle. Begin at the start."

"The start," exclaimed Uncle Billy bitterly, "come when you left. Blue Basin turned into a bloody hell. Hard-cases, rustlers, outlaws begun dropping down on us. They come from across the Columbia an' up Montana way. Like damn' buzzards they was, with Breed Payson leading 'em. God knows there ain't much to plunder in Blue Basin, but what there was they got. The beef they run off long ago; then they turned to burning and killing. Ain't nothing left of your outfit, boy, but a pile of ashes. They've took over Nugget, too; wiped out all them that was honest, an' now they're runnin' the whole shebang!"

CLAY BRADEN'S young face had lined savagely. As the old man's words fell on him, sending the dream he had built crashing into ruins, a terrible, bitter anger lay hold of him.

"Why?" he demanded. "In the name of God, why did all this happen?"

"Why?" repeated Uncle Billy stormily. "You know what you're bringing to this range, boy? You picked up this herd for maybe ten thousand in Texas. Hell, man, its worth a hundred thousand here! That's a fortune in this country. Breed Payson *let* you bring it this far. Wanted you to plunk it down in his lap. It'll be the biggest, blackest cattle haul ever made north of the Platte. That's why!"

The fighting rage was washing out of Clay Braden's tortured mind, but the fury that remained was cold, deadly.

"Lee Marts come here, Uncle, as you prob'ly know. Why'd he keep quiet about all this?"

"Marts!" snarled Uncle Billy venomously. "Lee Marts sold out to Breed Payson first thing. He's a rotten skunk, Clay. He figgered, I reckon, on double-crossing Payson. It was Lee Marts, Clay, that torched your place."

In two quick steps Clay Braden reached the side of Uncle Billy Malone and was gripping the old man's arm. His mind pictured in a flash the last time he had seen his brother, Ed Braden, who at fifteen thought he was a man. Ed had been standing in the doorway of the Braden cabin when Clay left. . . .

"Eddie!" Clay muttered hoarsely. "They didn't—?"

"Yeah," Uncle Billy said slowly. "Eddie must have been inside when Marts fired the place. It burned clear down, but we found where the door and window had been nailed shut."

For a long minute Clay Braden did not move. Then the full ghastliness of what had happened struck him. He had done what he set out to do, but he shuddered at the horrible price of it. And, worse

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than that, his dream was gone; his work futile. He had brought life to a range, but that very life had meant the range's bloody, treacherous death.

Uncle Billy Malone's voice came slowly. "That's why I say you better get back the way you come, Clay. There's still time. Nothing's left for you in Blue Basin."

Clay looked across the dying fire and saw grizzled old Tex Harker staring fixedly at him. He spoke to Uncle Billy without taking his eyes off Harker. "Some of the boys are left, though, ain't they? Marts talked about Rankin an' Billy Boyle."

"There's four of 'em left, Clay. I'd send 'em after you, wherever you went."

Clay Braden shook his head. A strange and icy intentness had taken possession of his gaunt features. "I'm stayin', Uncle. This herd is all the Blue Basin range has left. It's goin' through to Nugget, an' from there onto the range where it belongs."

CHAPTER TWO

Guns at the Blue Nugget

THE dawn which came at last was cheerless and gray, and for the first time in many weeks the herd was not moved at daybreak. Two of Clay Braden's hard-riding trail crew were holding it; the rest were clustered with a deceptive indifference near the dead fire.

Clay swung up on the tail-board of the chuck wagon. "I reckon Tex has told you what's waitin' for us at Nugget," he said tonelessly. "Well, it ain't your fight. You've got no part in it, nor no reason to mix. Some of us, I reckon, ain't never goin' to see Nugget, once we hit it. I can't talk fightin' wages to you, 'cause we ain't got it. Anyhow, what you hired out to do is done. So I'm payin' off here, 'stead of a few miles farther on—an' no hard feelin's goes with the damn deal."

He looked down at the eight men who had followed him over the gruelling miles from Texas. All of them were young except for the graying Harker; lean-flanked young hellions, muscles gaunted and toughened to whip-lash efficiency, nerves keyed to the ever-present threat of peril.

"Speakin' fer myself," drawled Harker. "I kinda hankered to stick in this country. Bein' old an' sot in my ways, I'm still figgerin' on it." He spat without vehemence into the dead fire.

A cowboy named Vance whose beard had not yet grown to fullness, shuffled in embarrassment. "Cripes!" he exploded. "*My* pile ain't stacked up enough yet to make 'er worth drawin'. Damn' if I'll quit now. Couldn't hardly git back south with what *I* got comin'." He stared around, red-faced, at his companions.

The undercurrent of tension snapped. Vance had said what the rest wanted to say, and as a reward they whooped and dove for him, cursing delightedly as they mauled him.

Tex Harker broke them apart with a stream of blistering cattle-trail profanity. "What the hell you waitin' on?" he roared. "Git them damn' cows movin' 'fore snow-balls start hittin' us. . . . !" His words trailed off as he strode for his horse.

No one waited for thanks. And Clay Braden, as he swung down from the chuck wagon, could have offered none. A choking dryness was in his throat. There was no adequate way to thank ten men who shruggingly offered their lives in a cause which did not concern them. He had not asked for loyalty such as that, had not expected it, but there it was.

Clay and Uncle Billy Malone mounted after Clay had pulled a second gun and belt from his warsack and buckled it about his waist.

Passing Tex Harker, he stopped for a moment. "Goin' in to look things over,

Tex. Push the herd out onto the flat and hold it there. Be back sometime tomorrow,I reckon." He looked steadily into the unwinking eyes of the veteran trail-boss. "An' Tex, even the herd ain't worth gettin' them boys killed off. If a fight comes up, remember that."

Then he and Uncle Billy shoved on at an easy lope. "I tell you, Clay," the old man grumbled, "you don't know what you're running into. Payson's cracking the whip over Blue Basin like he was the law. An' you know well as I do that there ain't no real law to buck him. Payson runs the whole damn' works. He an' Marts kin throw thirty-forty men agin you. An' you with 'bout ten rannicky younkers."

"There's four more," reminded Clay. "Rankin an'—"

"Two, you mean," Uncle Billy snorted. "Minkler's so bad hurt he ain't stirring out o' bed. And all the guts is scared out of Webb, he ain't worth counting. Figger on Boyle an' Rankin, that's all."

Clay mused to himself with a certain grimness as he scanned the chopped country before them. Another hour and they would be out of the badlands into the open. "Thirteen of us all told, then, Uncle Billy."

"Fourteen," croaked Uncle Billy Malone wrathfully. "Where the hell do you think I'll be?"

IT WAS afternoon before Clay Braden caught his first glimpse of the little huddle of shacks and discolored tents which was the town of Nugget. Hills swelled away behind it, deeply grassed slopes which melted into straggling timber. Miles beyond rose the mighty Blue Hills, cupped into a crescent, guarding the lush expanse of rangeland which lay between its distant horns.

Clay Braden rode into the town alone. He had parted with Uncle Billy after giving him instructions to bring Rankin and Boyle and meet him at the mouth of a canyon they both knew.

The town of Nugget, diminutive though it was, had grown enormously since Clay had left. There had been only a badly-stocked store, a prospector's shack or so, and a combination saloon and blacksmith shop. Now a maze of tents had blossomed, while here and there sprouted new frame buildings. Four or five were saloons; the rest held gambling lay-outs.

A peculiar wave of disquiet ran over Clay. There was a swaggering, callous air about the place which made the hair prickle on his scalp. Sounds of grimly jubilant celebration flowed from open doorways. Nugget had grown hard, dangerous. Men lounging in the crooked street, strangers all of them, regarded him in sullen silence.

At a fresh pine building bearing the crude sign BLUE NUGGET SALOON, he dismounted, tying his reins at the rickety hitching rack so that a jerk would loosen them. He felt the scrutiny of a dozen men boring at him. Expectancy, death itself, was in the air.

AS HE turned, his inspection riveted on a man who had stepped from the door of the saloon into the street.

Instantly Clay's mind flashed the name, Breed Payson. There could be no doubt of it. Dusky coloring and high, prominent cheek-bones betrayed his Indian blood, and he carried himself with a commanding insolence which could belong to no other man in Blue Basin. Moulded like a giant, he radiated force and savage power. There was less of evil in his face than raw ruthlessness.

For a full minute the two studied each other, Payson's great paws dangling close to the two black-butted revolvers leathered on his thighs.

Payson's voice rumbled out first. "Braden, ain't it? Been lookin' for you.

Come in an' have a drink with me."

"I'll do that," said Clay. He stepped carefully after Payson, like a man testing unsure ice.

The interior of the saloon was tomblike in its quiet. The dozen customers stared in silence at Clay Braden. Payson closed the door of the little room at the back, grinned and pointed to a bottle on the table. "Drink up, Braden. Then you can spout your proposition."

Clay poured a slug of whiskey into one of the two glasses and raised it to his lips. It was the first liquor he had touched in months and the taste was like fire in his throat. Payson's colossal assurance angered him.

"I've got no proposition," he said coolly.

"No?" Payson was unmoved. Nothing disturbed him but his own harsh desires, his own simple emotions. "I thought maybe you'd be wantin' to sell that herd of yours—say at a dollar a head—just so's to stay out of trouble."

Clay shrugged. "They're worth thirty, here."

Breed Payson threw back his head and guffawed. "Hell's bells! Look at it square, Braden. You're damn' lucky you ain't bein' paid a bellyful of lead for it."

"Think so, Payson? Well, listen to me. If there's lead-eatin' to be done, we'll both do it. I came to see you an' your set-up here. Now that I have I ain't backin' down. Stay away from that herd, 'cause if you come after it you'll collect more'n you figger on!"

Watching Breed Payson's guns, Clay backed to the door. The moment he had spoken he cursed himself for having done so. It was a foolish display and could make no difference in the end.

Payson was still laughing, hands braced on his slender hips. "Better not go out there, Braden." There was a taunt and a warning in that sentence.

But Clay Braden had slid through the doorway and with a swift click of his wrist had turned the key in the lock on the outer side. He wheeled to face the saloon proper, flattening for an instant against the wall. And as he did so the grim intention of that roomful of men between him and the street hit him. Every man in the room had been waiting for him to do precisely what he had done. They were spaced to kill him; to gun him down right at that instant.

THE time it took him to move seemed ages long to Clay. If guns had been flaming he felt that he could have seen the bullets traveling toward him. For in that moment the grisly hand of death seemed to fetter every movement.

Suddenly, it seemed to Clay, and for no apparent reason, the immobility of the scene exploded into action. He did not realize that his mind had been whipped subconsciously into lightning-like activity, and that he had flipped his two guns out of their holsters.

Then the first stirring in his range of vision destroyed the sense of unreality which had gripped him. Cold fury shook him. He knew that he was stalking forward, crouching a little, his thumbs cramped down on the cold metal of his gun hammers. A man leaning across a table directly in his path cursed and began to drag at his six-shooter. Clay shot, and the roaring sound crashed up among the rafters; the echoes thundered back in diminishing waves. The man fell forward, rolled to the floor.

Like a kaleidoscopic pattern, the scene shifted as Clay advanced, and his unwinking eyes registered each tiny change. He had one advantage, and to that he clung grimly. When the thing commenced, his guns had been the only weapons in the clear. A dozen minds operate at a dozen different speeds, and in that disorganization lay Clay Braden's one chance. The aproned form of the bartender blurred

as he flung up a shotgun. Clay's left-hand gun spat, and the bartender uttered a strange, strangling cry, throwing up both hands to a throat from which blood spurted.

Clay could pick out no details in the faces staring into his, but he felt their savagery and their tense watchfulness was like a pressure against which he was beating. He stumbled over the dead body of the man who had fallen by the table. And at that opportunity, courage spilled over in a pair of gunmen in the far corner. Simultaneously they dove for the protection of a poker table, their sixguns lashing out. In the splashing of flame and the crash of gunfire, Clay Braden felt a slug gash at the lump of muscle under his left arm. A stab of pain knifed through the hard shell of his concentration for an instant and vanished.

His own guns were kicking in his hands. The first shot missed; the second and third found their targets. One of the gunslingers sprawled inertly, and the other was on his hands and knees, his drooping head shaking drunkenly.

Events moved in a swift haze after that. Clay was sliding along the bar. The room was humming strangely. Someone was blurting a black string of oaths. Mingled with the choking cries of the wounded bartender, Clay could hear Breed Payson's wrathful bellowing. He heard the slogging impact as Payson drove his shoulder against the locked panel. Whorls of powdersmoke, sharp and stinging to the nostrils, distorted the figures in the saloon.

Back to the wall, Clay was drifting toward the batwing doors leading to the street. From the corner of his eye he saw the door of the back room splinter and crash outward. Breed Payson lurched through just as Clay whirled and darted out. Gun explosions spattered viciously behind him; shouts and rocking pistolfire tore apart the stifling tenseness.

Clay Braden leapt aside and bent low with one surging motion as he passed through the swinging doors into the street.

Then Clay had vaulted into his saddle, whirled the bronc's head up the street, and roweled the animal into a frantic burst of speed.

A voice shouted hoarsely ahead of Clay. He heard the sharp crack of a rifle, the singing whine of the bullet as it whipped past him. Behind him the Blue Nugget Saloon was vomiting its pack of cursing, maddened gunmen. Clay pulled sharply to the left, racing between two shabby, dirt-streaked tents. He cleared the straggling rubbish heaps and, low-bent over the flying pony's neck, headed for the sheltering hills. Guns were still snapping vengefully in Nugget, but the raging confusion cut off any possibility of immediate pursuit.

CHAPTER THREE

Double-Cross Range

DUSK was etching black into the hollows as Clay Braden came at a walk into the bleak open space which, six months ago, had been the site of his little Rocking B spread. Weeds and brush were springing up in it, half hiding the mound of charred ruins with its few remaining timbers.

Clay Braden dismounted heavily, memories torturing him. In that heap of ashes young Eddie Braden seemed to be standing, a grin on his freckled face. Clay heard the words again as Eddie had uttered them then, trying to make his voice low and full like a man's: "I'll be straddlin' the outfit when you git back, Clay. Don't worry your head none about me."

Now, terror lay everywhere like a deadly blight. And he, Clay Braden, had caused it. Better a thousand times that he had never dreamed of mighty herds populating Blue Basin's grassy slopes. But was

it? Here was a great cattle land, crying to be put to use. In all his life Clay had never prayed. But now as he hunched down, staring into the ashes of his life's hopes and love, tears ran unchecked down his gaunt and bearded cheeks.

His lips moved and he said aloud. "I done what I thought was best. I reckon you don't blame a man for that, God. I'll —I'll keep on doin' the same . . ."

Half an hour later he rode into the mouth of the canyon where he had promised to meet Uncle Billy Malone. It was no more than a half mile from Nugget, and the winking lights were visible. Moments after that he was gripping the hand of rugged, fiery Billy Doyle and exchanging a fervent greeting with young Mel Rankin.

For a long time the four men talked together, speaking of the dark hazards which had befallen Blue Basin, of the course which now was to be followed.

Doyle spun away a cigarette stub in the darkness. "I'll fight," he said, "if it comes to that, but what I'm looking at is the odds. Dead men never run no cattle. They're three to one agin us, an' the pack of 'em gun-toters with reps. Mabbe the smart thing would be to rattle our hocks out of here. Take the breeder stuff an' hightail."

"How far," queried Rankin softly, "d'you reckon Payson and Marts'd let us git?"

Clay Braden spoke slowly and his voice had an unnatural metallic quality which it had never held before. "Me, I'm stayin', regardless." He got up and walked away a little. He couldn't say that those three thousand cattle on the edge of the badlands were more than a trail herd to him, that there are some things a man will give his life for and count the price a cheap one.

He was startled by the sound of Uncle Billy Malone springing to his feet. Some noise which had escaped the others had penetrated to the trained ears of the old scout. His croaking voice snapped at them. "Something doin' in Nugget, Clay. Riding out, the hull lot of 'em."

"Headin' which way?" Clay jerked, swept suddenly by the sinister import of the information.

"East, an' burning saddle leather. Them cows won't be worth a whoop to nobody, Clay, if—"

But Clay Braden was already running for his horse. "Hit leather," he barked savagely, "or there'll be nothing for any of us to worry about."

There was no hesitation among the other three. As if the coming of a crisis had welded their indecision into a single purpose, they sprang after Clay. They strung out after him, riding hard through the quiet, star-sprinkled night. The dimly blinking lights of Nugget drew abreast of them, then fell away behind. While the pounding of their own hoofs blotted out all other sounds, they knew that somewhere ahead a killer crew was driving through the darkness on an errand of destruction.

Mile after hard-fought mile flowed to the rear. Uncle Billy Malone spurred abreast of Clay and growled, "You're pulling up on 'em, kid. What you figger—?"

The distant rattle of shots broke in on his words. Clay swore hoarsely. "They're gunnin' 'em down, Uncle. Only ten boys out there, tryin' to stop 'em."

With quickening horror he got the picture: that mob of blood-hungry renegades sweeping relentlessly against his thin line of trail-weary punchers. Payson's men were riding to win a rich booty. Nothing would stop them. Furiously Clay put steel to his pony, only to realize that the best energies of the beast were spent. Guns were booming with increased violence down beyond them. It would be slaughter, a wipe-out!

ONCE he looked back over his shoulder to see the three bobbing figures pounding through the gloom at his heels.

Then his glance riveted ahead again. Muzzle flashes were blooming and vanishing in the darkness.

Then over the staccato bark of the shots mounted a terrifying rumbling sound, like distant and sustained thunderclaps. It swelled and boomed through the night with a mighty, surging roar. Overwhelmed by it, gun thunder dimmed to a faint and futile popping.

"Gone!" Clay gritted between clenched teeth. "The herd's gone."

The ground beneath his pony's hoofs seemed to vibrate from the distant impact of the ferociously charging cattle. Three thousand Texas longhorns, maddened into blindness, blasting a reckless path of terror through the night! Clay's breath caught in his throat. The herd was hurtling eastward, straight back into the treacherous badlands from which they had emerged that day. The agonized desperation of helplessness caught up Clay Braden. Hundred of animals would probably be maimed and killed before the panic of that perilous, headlong rush was overcome by weariness. Even then the rest of the cattle would be hopelessly scattered. It would take days, weeks perhaps, to gather them again. Payson and Marts had wrought more evil than they had planned.

The fighting, indicated by the slashes of fire in the darkness, drifted in the wake of the herd. The herders, evidently, had been able to make no effort to stop the stampede. They were making a running fight of it, hemmed and harried by a vicious semi-circle of blazing guns.

The softening rumble of the fleeing cattle covered Clay's approach. He did not look behind again to see if the others were with him. He neither thought of them nor cared. A wild fury had swept all caution, all temperate thinking, out of his mind. Some of his fiercely coursing energy seemed to be imparted to the pony between his knees, for the flagging beast mustered a last despairing spurt.

Clay's two guns were in his hands. A primitive exultation welled up in him as he felt them buck when he rocked the hammers. He was shouting lurid, indistinguishable phrases, throwing a flailing sheet of bullets from his hot guns. Fleeting, ghost-like figures sifted into his field of vision, dropped out again. Lead was screeching at him.

As if they were sounds his memory was conjuring up, he heard the crash of gunfire behind him. He did not realize that Uncle Billy and Rankin and Doyle were racing at his heels, adding their flaming weapons to his.

Their attack was damaging, but the suddenness and unexpectedness of it was what turned the tide. The line of outlaw guns which was closing in on the hard-pressed trail crew broke under that murderous onslaught and spurred away to reform. For a brief minute or two horsemen were careening in confusion there in the darkness. Then the shooting had died to an occasional spiteful snarl which fell away into an intense quiet.

Tex Harker's voice came to Clay, gruffly admiring. "Hold it, Clay, you battlin' knot-head."

The crew had holed up in a shallow coulee. They made a huddled blot in the darkness. Clay slid down the crumbling bank among them, drawing alongside the grizzled old warrior.

"Thank God you come through, Tex! How're the rest?"

"They got two of us," growled Tex, "the first time we mixed—Davis an' Lanky. They was too damn' many of 'em. That stampede give us our chance to make a fight of it." Harker talked through his teeth as he knotted a bandanna around his left wrist.

Clay Braden was staring out into the darkness. The sound of milling hoofs, muffled and distant, flowed down the currents of the night air, bringing with it a wave of desperate hopelessness. Death

was lurking out there, poised and ready to strike. They might make a stand here in this little coulee; they might exact their toll before screaming lead cut down the last of them, but it would be only a gesture.

"What's the move, Clay?" Harker demanded with a strange quiet. "Cattle've gone to hell, as I reckon you know."

"We're pullin' out," Clay answered harshly, "takin' to the hills. From now on the herd belongs to Breed Payson and Lee Marts."

AS DAWN shone red over the Blue Basin country, the little party had reached a point high on the timbered slopes beyond Nugget. They had halted on the way to pick up the bodies of Lanky and Davis, and there, on a little rise overlooking the plain, they buried them. One other of the trail crew was dying with a bullet through his lungs. There were wounds, too, among the rest of the meagre company. Clay's side was stiff and inflamed, though no bones were broken.

With the bitterness of defeat galling him as they made their retreat, his mind had been groping for some course of action which would not be sheer suicide. The cattle were gone, temporarily at least, and Breed Payson with his pack of gunmen controlled the range. Here was no instance of outlaws harrying a cattle country stealthily from ambush. Here, in a frontier land which the law had not yet visited, the wolfish renegades were in command. They swaggered arrogantly in the open, with nothing to hinder their lawlessness. The honest men were in hiding, outlawed, the death-threat stalking their trails.

But the rich booty which had brought about their condition had been scattered far and wide in the tumbled Blue Basin badlands. . . .

Tex Harker looked up from where he sat by the fire, shaggy eyebrows knotted. "Was you meanin' that, Clay, 'bout letting breed Payson have the herd?"

Clay nodded, then stared around the circle of haggard, bullet-torn men who had elected to wage a battle of hopelessness. He spoke slowly, and each word was dry, incisive, as if it had been chiseled out with a knife.

"We ain't got a prayer if we meet Payson and Marts in an open fight. You all know that. Right now, they're too tough to buck. They're the law here in Blue Basin, an' we're outside lookin' in. All right, we'll play it that way. We've took to the hills; we'll stay here an' play the hand they'd be playin' if we was in the high seat.

"Maybe they think we're goin' after that herd. We ain't. It ain't worth a hoot in hell to 'em till it's gathered, so you can be damn sure *they'll* go after it. Ridin' that badlands country is man-killin' work, an' you can bet, too, that Payson's whiskey-swillin' gunnies ain't goin' to cotton to the job a little bit. There'll be hell kicked up in that outfit 'fore it's over."

Clay paused for a moment, and when no one spoke he went on again. "There's another thing I'm figgerin' on. Payson an' Marts have thrown in together, but I reckon there ain't no love lost between 'em. Breed Payson'd cut Marts' throat rather than split them cows. He'd do the same for any man. Lee Marts figgers purty close the same way. He ain't hankerin' to ride owlhoot the rest of his life an' wind up with a bullet in his brisket. He wants to make a big name for hisself in cattle; wants to grab all of Blue Basin to run his stuff in. I'd take twenty-to-one odds that right now Marts is bustin' his brains for a way to double-cross Payson."

Uncle Billy Malone grunted in angry scorn. "Damn if that idee hits me as any great shakes, Clay. Maybe it'd work out that-away and maybe it wouldn't. What the hell are we supposed to be doing—setting around on our haunches like pups that's had their dinner stole?"

"Not by a damn' sight!"

The fire sizzled as Tex Harker quenched a glowing pine knot with a stream of tobacco juice. "What, then? We ain't goin' after the herd, we're too crippled up for a fight, an' they'll be huntin' our scalps!"

"Plenty," snapped Clay. "First thing to do is to make 'em think we're washed up, finished. With us off their minds, they'll begin' raisin' hell among themselves." Clay Braden leaned forward, his eyes alight, talking swiftly and intently.

"The Texas boys, all except Harker, will head south and east out of this territory, bein' careful to leave sign that's plenty easy to read. A day's ride away they'll peter out the trail an' circle back, keepin' to the rock an' out of sight. You, Rankin an' Doyle, load all the stuff you can carry on wagons an' strike north through the hills. Clearin' out, d'you see? Leavin' your outfits, headin' for a new range. When you've gone far enough to be safe, hide the wagons an' come back."

"An' then?" demanded Doyle eagerly.

"Then you'll meet here. Payson's gunhawks'll be ridin' the badlands by that time, either solo or in pairs. The odds'll be whittled down to our size. You'll be tallyin' for the burnin' an' murderin' they've been dealin' out. Main thing will be to do a clean job each time. If word leaks out that we're back, the whole scheme'll be blown sky-high."

Tex Harker clambered to his feet, rumbling: "Might work, at that. Damn tricky business. You ain't mentioned me an' you, younker."

Clay grinned into the peering face of the grizzled old-timer. "I'll be workin' on Marts, Tex, steamin' him up to the blow-off. Your little chore is to sign on as one of Breed Payson's gun-handlers. Somebody's got to keep whisperin' in his ear that Marts is dealin' him the double-cross. He'll be losin' riders in the badlands, an' he's got to figger that Marts is pulling the underhand gun-play."

CHAPTER FOUR

Gunman's Pay

FOR TWO days Tex, Clay and Uncle Billy Malone waited restlessly in the hills after the others had departed. Then Tex and Clay rode out, leaving Uncle Billy behind, for on his shoulders would be the responsibility of the raiding parties.

Halfway to Nugget, Clay and Tex Harker parted company. "Blue Nugget Saloon is where you'll most likely find him," Clay said steadily. "Wait a couple hours before you ride in; I'll circle back after seein' Marts, to cover you in case there's trouble." The two men, the old one and the young, gripped hands. "Luck to you, kid," said Harker gruffly, and the two rode apart.

Lee Marts' Boxed M, Clay Braden found, had not suffered along with the other outfits in Blue Basin. Marts had been too shrewd for that. Indeed his ranch had expanded; there was a new shed or two, new corrals, and an addition had been plastered against the original two-room cabin.

There were six or eight riders lounging near the bunkhouse above the corrals. Clay ground-tied his mount in the lee of a cutbank and went toward the house on foot. There were no dogs. Lee Marts hated them.

One of the rough boards of the porch creaked slightly as he set foot to it, then the front door yielded to the easy pressure of his hand and he was inside, in the cool darkness of the front room. Across from him a shallow strip of light indicated the passageway to the apartment at the rear. A flitting, silent shadow, he crossed the room; in front of that rear door he hesitated. He heard no voices, only the faint rustling of papers.

Then, swiftly, Clay Braden pushed open the panel and slid inside, his gun before him.

Lee Marts was seated at a rudely constructed desk. His sullen face snapped up from the letters he was examining.

"Easy," whispered Clay tersely. "Don't move, an' keep your voice down!"

The glittering, steady barrel of his weapon made any threat unnecessary. And as he stood there Clay Braden's coolness was swept aside by a burning lust to kill.

He saw in Lee Marts the stumbling block of all his hopes. It was this squat, leering husk of a man who had burned his outfit, betrayed the Blue Basin range. And he had taken the life of harmless little Ed Braden. The gun felt hot and heavy in Clay's hand. His lithe fingers clenched on the grip. His urge to drop the hammer and send a slug ripping into Lee Marts' body was like a wild thing loose and lashing in his breast.

Clay felt cold sweat trickling on his forehead as he fought to steady down. Other than that, his gaunt face had revealed none of the struggle. The lust to slay had flamed and died away in a matter of seconds.

Lee Marts snarled, "Well, Braden?"

CLAY shrugged. He had a part to play —the part of a man who is whipped, pleading for scraps from the victors' table. He pushed his sixgun back into its holster. "I—I ain't here to do you harm," he whined. "You're top dog. I ain't disputin' it."

"That's right," rasped Marts. "You'd be a dead man before you could get out of this room. Then what is it you come for?"

"I—I got a proposition. The way I figger it, from now on Blue Basin is goin to have one boss, and that'll be you. I'm licked. I know that. My Texas boys turned chicken-livered an' hit a high lope back the way they come. The fight you an' Payson give 'em didn't set so well. What I'm wonderin' about is this: how's that herd goin' to be split between you and Payson? What's the deal on that?"

Lee Marts' heavy face darkened angrily. "Ain't settled yet. What the hell is it to you?"

"A good deal," said Clay haltingly. "Way I see it, Payson's goin' to try to cheat you outta your share. You'll fight back, an' you'll win. That's why I'm comin' to you now."

"You ain't told me nothin' yet," snapped Marts.

"I'm comin' to that. Payson's an outlaw. He'd sell the herd, thumb his nose at the law if it come to that, an' hightail for South America. Sooner or later the law's goin' to look into this mess here. Now you, you're different. You're aimin' to stick here, build up a spread. If the law gets nosey, you'll want a clean bill of health. Am I right?"

"Keep talkin'."

In the light from the smoky lamp Clay's face looked more haggard than before, more hopelessly resigned. "All right, Marts, listen! If you knock over Breed Payson an' take the herd, I'll make out a bill-of-sale to you for the whole damned works. The herd's been in my name, y'know, while I was bringin' it up the trail."

"On what condition?" snapped Marts.

"Not much. All I want is a hundred or so breeders. I'll clear out of here with 'em. Take 'em to hell-and-gone north of this range."

Lee Marts leaned back in his chair, his peering eyes gleaming hotly under their thick black brows. All this was more than he had hoped for. As in most crafty men, a vein of fear lay beside his cunning. His greed had made him leap blindly into partnership with Payson, but he had been secretly afraid of the outcome and the risk it entailed toward his future. This solved that part of the matter adequately. He was only too glad to salve over his black treachery with a coat of lawfulness. It would be a simple thing, too, once the

bill-of-sale was in his possession, to make an end of this Clay Braden who had revealed himself so obviously as a coward. Lee Marts grunted. "I'll be takin' all the risks, Braden, but—"

"Risks you'd have to take anyhow," Clay pointed out.

"Maybe so, maybe so. Breed Payson ain't so big he can't be downed, though. You an' me kin do business, Braden."

Clay turned to the door. "I'll be countin' on that, Marts. See you later."

IT TOOK Clay the better part of an hour to reach Nugget and make his way through the shrouding darkness of the outskirts to the rear of the Blue Nugget Saloon. Tex Harker, apparently, had tired of waiting and had hit the town alone. Clay bellied down in the dirt as voices seeped through the thin partition to him.

Breed Payson's deep voice was rumbling. "Take his iron, Mule. That's right. Now, Texas, if you got talk to make, spit it out fast."

"Don't get me wrong," It was Tex Harker's gruff tone. "I ain't homin' to swap lead with you gents."

Squirming forward a little, Clay found a warped board which afforded him a scanty view of the interior. It was the same room into which Breed Payson had taken him. Three men were in it now, all of them standing. The third man who stood by the door with a gun trained on Harker, and whom Payson addressed as Mule, Clay did not know.

"What I come to find out," drawled Harker, "is, kin you use a gent that cut his teeth on a six-shooter an' don't booger none when he sniffs powdersmoke?"

"Howcome," Payson shot back, "you didn't make dust with them gun-slingin' pals of yours?"

Harker drilled a knot-hole in the floor with a shaft of tobacco juice, and grinned. "'Cause I ain't a plumb fool, that's why. The law's got my pitcher nailed on trees down in the Pecos country. I pulled stakes out o' there figgerin' to stay out. Means a neck-stretchin' for me if I go back. I've drawed gun-pay before an' didn't do no bucking. An' I don't give a damn what the chore is, long as my palm gits greased reg'lar."

Breed Payson's hairy paw fumbled at his chin. "Tell you where I *can* use you. Ramroddin' the bunch that's snakin' them damn cows outa the rough country. When they're gathered, we'll maybe talk some more about that gun job."

"You're talkin' my language," grinned Tex. "First a yearlin', then a steer. An' seeing's you're going to be friendly, I'll spill somethin' you may be interested in. Maybe you know that Lee Marts come traipsin' down into the badlands with a deal that would give him an' Clay Braden the herd, leavin' you out in the cold."

The man called Mule spoke for the first time, flatly. "I told you that yellow coyote was playin' his own game, Breed."

"That's a fact," agreed Harker complacently. "Braden was too damn honest to throw in with him."

Breed Payson scowled. "I'll put a man to watchin' Marts. You've done earned your first month's pay, Texas. Come on in an' drink on it."

CHAPTER FIVE

Clay Rides Out

THE WEEK which followed ran speedily for Clay Braden. In the saddle from daybreak until far into the night, he slept but little. With a pair of binoculars he scouted the hills and the badlands, and day by day he watched the herd of Texas longhorns grow there on the edge of the plain. Tex Harker, he knew, was holding his round-up crew of surly gunmen with a loose hand. Fights were frequent. The outfit was splitting up into little groups of trigger-touchy malcontents.

Uncle Billy Malone, meanwhile, pursued his task with a grim relentlessness, bringing to bear all of the canny lore he had picked up in a lifetime as a plainsman. Breed Payson's gun crew was being gradually whittled down. Men disappeared. Now and again some rider on a remote circle would stumble on the dead body of a comrade who had not reported to the wagon the night before. Nor was there sign to trace the killers. Word spread among the outlaws that the cattle gather there in the Blue Basin badlands was a hoodoo job.

Each night Uncle Billy would recount the day's success or failure to Clay Braden over a carefully sheltered fire in the hills.

"No back-shooting," he was wont to croak, shaking the gray locks which fell about his shoulders. "They're getting their chance fer a fair fight. An' the on'y gents that've had a look at us have died right after."

Clay leaned back, sober, thinking. But fire was mounting in his veins. And that same spirit of fierce waiting spread through the little camp. Each hour was bringing the showdown closer. . . .

One night, squatting by the fire, Uncle Billy Malone drew an object from the pocket of his fringed buckskin jacket and passed it silently across to Clay.

It was a leather glove, smaller than a man's, and burned in the cuff were the crude initials E. B.

For a long time Clay gripped it, staring before him. He spoke at last, hoarsely, as if his voice were being torn from his throat. "Eddie's! Where—where'd you find it?"

"Bout five miles yonder in the hills."

Clay Braden got to his feet. His body was trembling. "Uncle Billy, you don't reckon—"

The old man shook his head. "Can't tell, kid. They was fresh sign of a fire near 'em. I ain't said nothin' about it, but we been crossing the trail of a gent out there who's been doing plenty crawling around. Ain't never set eyes on him; he keeps out of the way. Mebbe it's Eddie, but most likely it ain't."

"You didn't find his—you didn't find him in the fire," Clay burst out savagely. His eyes roved appealingly to Doyle and Rankin. Neither answered his look; their faces were set.

"No we didn't, an' that's a fact," responded Uncle Billy. "But whether he *wasn't* in it when it burned, I dunno. I kinda held off showing you the glove, not being sure jest how much it means."

The grayness of dawn was creeping into the sky before Clay Braden dropped asleep that night from sheer exhaustion, his mind rioting with fantastic hope for a freckle-faced boy who might still be alive.

IT WAS the night after that that old Tex Harker rode into camp with news which bristled with import.

"We're taperin' off on the gather tomorrow," he advised. "Any play that's comin' up I reckon'll break tomorrow night."

"What's the set-up down below?" demanded Clay.

Tex chuckled drily. "Hell's bein' harnessed, if you want to know. Payson an' Marts are both pawin' dirt like a couple ringy bulls. Lee Marts has been buyin' off Payson gunnies till he's got damn' near as many wearin' his brand as Payson has. Payson knows that. He's had a gent named Mule Lindsay tailin' Marts, and he's kinda leery about a fight. You boys been doin' a clean job down in the badlands, an' Payson thinks Marts' bushwhackers been notchin' their guns. So he's been drygulchin' Marts' hands whenever he got the chance. Down to Nugget guns is bein' oiled fer the showdown."

Clay Braden sprang to his feet. "Fair enough, Tex. By tomorrow night Blue Basin'll have plenty to thank you for. Now we'll move this play to a finish. Tell Payson in the mornin' that soon as it's dark

you want to push the herd north to a better holding ground. Tip him off that it might not be such a bad idea to keep it travelin' once it's under way—run 'em out from under Marts' nose, d'you see?"

"Then what?" growled Uncle Billy Malone.

"Me, I'm leavin' now to see Marts," Clay snapped. "Knowin' the deal that Payson's rigged, he'll move to block it. Let Payson start shovin' that herd, an' Marts'll jump him with his gun hawks."

Tex Harker's grizzled head looked like a satyr's as he grinned in the firelight. "An' we'll be standin' by ready to jump 'em *both* when they've shot their wad!"

Clay Braden laughed—the first sound of eager hope to pass his lips since he had returned into the shadow of the Blues. "You've said somethin', Tex."

They were on their feet around the fire then, Mel Rankin and rugged Billy Doyle and the seven bronzed, hardy youngsters who had come up the trail from Texas, talking in voices hoarse with excitement. Anger over past hurts had been fanned to a white heat. Here at last was the payoff looming. . . .

BUT facing stubby, flabby-faced Lee Marts across the desk in his makeshift office, Clay Braden was assailed by a subtle, inexplicable doubt. Something was wrong. The moment Lee Marts' peering eyes fastened upon him, Clay felt it.

The renegade cattleman listened to Clay's information too stolidly. His pendulous features remained too expressionless. The effort of will he was making transmitted itself to Clay, warning him. It was as if Lee Marts were struggling to suppress some cunning knowledge which he burned to reveal. He sat very still, with one hand out of sight below the desk top.

Clay shrugged. "That's the story. Come dark tomorrow, he'll be pullin' out."

"Fine," said Marts, his eyes glittering. "And if I go gunnin' for him, you'll be holdin' the pat hand, won't you, Braden?"

Clay's body was growing tense, his mind whipping into a realization of what was happening. "I don't get you," he said coolly.

"I reckon you do. Know what I think, Braden? I think that trail crew of yours laid a tricky sign. So did Doyle an' Rankin. They're in the hills someplace, all of 'em. Who's been pickin' off Breed Payson's riders? *I* ain't Then it's you, an' you ain't workin' alone. What the hell! Payson's got no sense or he'd see it. You're figgerin' for us to tangle; then you'll clean up what's left."

Clay felt himself growing cold. He guessed what was coming and set himself for it. He had experienced a similar sensation when socking home his feet in the stirrups, with an outlaw bronc exploding under him.

But he said quietly, "You're a fool, Marts, to back water now."

"I *was* a fool," snarled Marts. "But I ain't no more. Half a herd's worth more to me than nothin'. I'm goin' to Payson, spillin' the lay to him."

"Think he'll believe you? He'll backshoot you first chance he gets."

Color had drained out of Lee Marts' face. It hardened into taut lines of vicious purpose. "He'll believe me, Braden," he sneered, "when we rout your pack of night-slinkin' coyotes out of the hills. He'll believe me when I show him your dirty carcass."

Lee Marts moved with a speed his squat bulk did not imply. The black snout of a revolver tilted up over the desk edge. The range was point-blank.

But Clay, tensed and waiting for just that action, preceded it by the fraction of a second. His glance had never left Lee Marts' concealed hand, and as the gun muzzle came thrusting into sight he had thrown himself violently to the side and down.

He was snatching at his own weapon as he fell, as the crashing of Marts' weapon filled the room. As he hit the floor the snarl of his shot blended with the first. Clay had intended the bullet for Marts' heart, but his aim was spoiled by his fall. He saw splinters whirl up as the slug ploughed through the desk top, saw the revolver spin from Marts' fist into the corner.

He came to his feet again, crouching, but the look of panic on the flabby face of Lee Marts held his hand. Marts looked as if he were choking; purple congestion dyed his cheeks; his eyeballs were bulging from their sockets. Much as he hated the betrayer of Blue Basin, much as the man deserved it, Clay could not drive a bullet into an unarmed man—even if that man was Lee Marts.

Instead, cursing at his weakness, Clay whirled for the door. Those shots would bring the gun-pack in the bunkhouse storming up from below.

Marts read his grant of life in that movement, and the agonized fear ran out of him. He dodged down behind the desk, screeching, "This way! In here! Get him, damn it! Cut him off in front."

As Clay reached for the knob, the door was flung open. A figure was outlined in the darkness of the little hallway. Light flooded blindingly over a bleak and snarling face.

The shaft of brilliance gave to Clay Braden the instant of advantage. He shot from the hip, then leaped ahead over the man's tumbling body.

Clay did not look back as he raced through the black front room. He had recognized that face before his thumb dropped the hammer. It had belonged to Mule Lindsay, Breed Payson's henchman who had been set to watch Lee Marts. And Mule Lindsay was dead.

The keen night air smote Clay like a breath of strength. Though a confused chorus of shouts was rising from the rear, no one had yet come in sight. Marts was still shrieking fervid curses. Bending low, Clay ran straight away from the porch. Darkness swallowed him as men pounded into the house.

Minutes later he was in the saddle and spurring grimly back toward the hill hideout. The plan which had seemed so certain to succeed had blown up. Let Marts join forces with Breed Payson and the herd would be lost. Hope for the Blue Basin range would vanish in a holocaust of bloodshed.

CHAPTER SIX

Jackpot!

THE silence of grim resignation settled over the little camp in the hills as Clay Braden told in jerky sentences of his encounter with Marts. There was a finality about it which smashed utterly the fierce surge of hope which had rolled up so confidently earlier that same night.

Uncle Billy Malone was the first to speak. "Hell!" he croaked. "Ain't nobody to blame. Them things happen."

Doyle cleared his throat uncomfortably. "They're gangin' up and comin' after us, did you say, Clay?"

"Yeah," retorted Clay Braden tonelessly. He was standing stiffly, with his fist clenched. He went on, his voice flat and bitter. "There' just two things we can do: ride out of this country or hit Payson an' Marts right now before they can get together!"

He waited, unwilling to urge either course. The sane sense of the first proposal and the deadly rashness of the second were vividly apparent.

It was Uncle Billy again who voiced a general opinion with fatalistic casualness. "Never have taught these damn' bow-laigs o' mine running habits, Clay. Maybe we should uh come out in the open a long time ago. My hunch is to jump Payson

first. Marts has been warned an' Breed ain't. Starting now, we'll hit Nugget 'bout daylight."

Without waiting for approval or support, he tightened the belt about his scrawny waist and began to stride toward the picketed horses. Silently, one by one, the men followed after Uncle Billy Malone.

It was no rushing, reckless ride they made to Nugget then in the late hours of the night. They did not hurry. There was no hot-headed eagerness, no bravura. They were ten men who had ridden knee-to-knee with hardship and privation since the beginning of their hard-pressed lives. The frontier had demanded that of them. And because they were a part of the frontier, they accepted its requirements without complaint. They knew well enough now that some if not all of them were going to their deaths. Well, that was part of it. What of it? Better a short life a man could be proud of than a long one to be looked back on with regret.

At the coming of the dawn they dropped down into the brushy lower hills. Uncle Billy drew up alongside Clay, frowning "Look yonder," he directed. "What the hell do you make of it?"

A thin streamer of smoke had puffed up beyond a rim of hills. Even as they watched, it grew larger, swelled into a thick column.

"Nugget!" Clay jerked out excitedly. "The town's afire!"

"By God, that'll help!" snapped Doyle.

They roweled their mounts down into a hollow, then up along the ridge which commanded a view of the plain and of Nugget. "Don't show yourselves," Clay ordered, and they clung just beneath the brow.

Gray smoke was billowing up from a bed of leaping flame at one end of the town. Fanned by a brisk wind, streamers of fire darted out, clawing at fresh structures, leaping in sheets up the slopes of the flimsy tents. It looked like showdown.

SO intent had they been on the fire that only the keen eyes of Uncle Billy perceived a horseman racing from hollow to hollow toward them from the direction of the town. He was crouching low in the saddle, quirting his mount at every jump.

Clay's eyes narrowed. Ain't Tex Harker's pony, an' he ain't ridin' like Tex."

The rider had plunged into a sharp-banked coulee. He popped out of it again and began to weave through the clumps of brush. They caught only brief glimpses of him as he came on.

"Whoever he is he's stoppin' here," said Clay tersely. "Spread out and don't let him through. Gun him if you have to. It ain't Tex."

They saw a low-pulled, floppy hat brim, a ragged coat sleeve, then the oncoming stranger had vanished again into a dense thicket directly below them. There was the crackling of brush under flying hoofs, then the horse emerged on the near side, but it was riderless.

Warned, perhaps, by the flash of light on some polished gun barrel, the stranger had become aware of the ambush he had blundered into. Unable to swerve or turn back, he had preferred to drop off and take a chance in the thicket.

Uncle Billy swore and wriggled forward. "Come out o' there," he called, "or get blowed out!"

"Go to hell, Uncle," came the cheerful reply. "Come an inch closer an' I'll bust that silly old face of yours wide open with a slug. Go back an' tell Lee Marts—"

Clay Braden leaped to his feet. Unmindful of Uncle Billy Malone's towering profanity he was jumping down toward the thicket. "Eddie!" he bellowed. "For God's sake, *Eddie!*"

He was swearing delightedly in the agony of his relief. That voice which he had heard so many times in his mind on

the trip back from Texas, could not deceive him now.

From the thicket walked a freckle-faced youngster, trailing a rifle in one hand. He was grinning from ear to ear, saying, "Hell, Clay, I thought you'd pulled out." Then Clay had caught the boy to him, was rumpling his tousled hair.

Uncle Billy's sharp command broke them apart. "Hit cover, Clay, pronto! Breed Payson's riding out!"

The conflagration below them had eaten through half the town. There would be no stopping it. In another half hour Nugget would be reduced to smouldering ashes. Riders were pouring out from the open end of the town, hitting at a high lope for the hills a mile or so to the right of Clay's position. They were not simply abandoning Nugget. There was purpose in the way they bunched up, heading out on a sure trail.

"What the devil they up to now?" croaked Uncle Billy.

Eddie Braden grinned. "They're figgerin' to wipe out Lee Marts' bunch. I heard 'em talkin'. Payson thinks Marts had the fire started."

Clay was staring hard after the vanishing party of gunmen. So that was it! Lee Marts had delayed his conference with Payson until morning, but now that it was morning, it was too late. Clay turned to the others, and his voice was quiet. "I reckon the breaks are beginnin' to fall our way, gents. Hit leather. We only got one fight ahead of us instead of two."

Long before they came in sight of Lee Marts' Boxed M they heard the frantic booming of guns. The staccato barking died to a sporadic rattle, then came on again in swift spurts. The battle which was going on, though out of sight, was clearly rendered by the waves of sound. It was no long-drawn siege, but a fierce and hot clash of gun-strength, bloody and quickly decided.

Clay Braden flung a quick glance over his shoulder. There were nine men hammering behind him, and he thrilled savagely. They streamed between two low shoulders and came out abruptly into sight of the ranchhouse. They fanned out, spurring hard, and went at a dead run toward the thick of the fight.

With some fifteen gunmen at his back, Breed Payson had apparently thundered into the ranch while the Marts riders, at full strength, were saddling to head for Nugget. The pent-up hostility between the two groups had flamed, banishing any possibility of parley. Payson's gunhawks had swooped down behind roaring guns, and the Marts hands had retreated to the house.

RIDERLESS horses were spraying across the yard, for the corral gate had been left open. Here and there under their charging hoofs sprawled limp bodies. Shouts of pain and triumph, the trumpeting of milling horses, the thundering snarl of sixguns, were parts of a scene over which utter confusion reigned.

A few duels between isolated groups had developed among the sheds and corrals. Under a hail of lead from the windows, Breed Payson and those of his men who could rally to his bellowing were assailing the front of the ranchhouse. They burst in, blood-hungry, and the raucous bawl of their guns grew hollow and muffled.

Into that confused and barbaric melee clattered Clay Braden, his crew of Texans and the men of Blue Basin who had seen their friends murdered, their homes torn from under them.

They hit dirt in front of the battle-torn ranchhouse from which the pound of gunfire still drummed. With six-full guns they rushed the door in a grimly silent, compact group. First across the bloody threshold, Clay Braden's vision encompassed the scene within.

The door to the sleeping room and kitchen at the left had been splintered open and he caught the movement of fighting bodies. Four men were dead or dying on the floor of the front room. The little hallway leading to Lee Marts' makeshift office was choked with fleeing men. Some of them, perhaps, were dead, being held up only by the press, for Breed Payson was planted on widespread feet in the middle of the room, cramming fresh shells into a smoking gun and yelling at the top of his lungs. Beyond Payson, against the wall, sat Lee Marts. He seemed about to get up, but he did not move, his chest was a bloody smear and his face was gone.

"Payson!" screamed Clay, and Breed Payson's gigantic bulk whirled about, seeming more enormous than ever in the drifting skeins of powdersmoke. What his slow-moving, arrogant mind registered then, his dusky, Indian-like face did not record. It was set in ferocious fighting lines, and it did not change.

He died there as he was leveling his pistol, a bullet from Clay's weapon in his heart.

Before his great frame had toppled to the floor, the men behind Clay had moved on past him and were leaping to the two rooms which were not yet clear of fighters.

In that first flush of attack there was no quarter granted. Too much anguish and bodily hurt lay behind it. Brutal and ghastly as it was, only such measures could bring about the purge of Blue Basin which was so essential to the range's future. Gradually the fighting died, and with it died the lust for vengeance. Toward the end, guns were taken instead of lives. . . .

When they cleared the yard they found old Tex Harker holed up in a corner of the bunkhouse. One of his arms was broken, but he was holding at bay a ring of attackers. His wound was not the only one sustained by the men of Blue Basin, but of them all only one had fallen. Rugged Billy Doyle took a bullet in his stomach at the outset of the yard fighting, and died before the battle was ended.

THERE followed a period of reconstruction for the Blue Basin country. Three of the Texas trail crew, including the grizzled Harker, elected to stay, and were given an equal share of the herd. The grassy slopes of the Blue Basin range could accommodate them amply, and in the course of its future it accommodated many more.

It was not until weeks after that eventful last day that Clay Braden was able to turn to his own affairs. He and Eddie and Uncle Billy Malone were hauling logs for a new cabin when Uncle Billy rubbed a hand through his graying whiskers and complained: "Don't see yet how a smart-aleck kid like Eddie with no more brains'n he's got, could crawl out of the old place when it was torched."

Eddie was grinning. "When things busted wide open here I took to sleepin' outside away from the place. I watched 'em nail up the door an' put fire to it. Then I took to the hills."

"And me," groaned Uncle Billy, "turning over them cussed badlands stone by stone, looking for him. An' him skippin' around like a damned jackrabbit."

"I seen you plenty times," Eddie chuckled, "but I was scairt to let on. I'd heard Payson's riders sayin' that Clay here had pulled stakes, an' I figgered you was handlin' a gun for Lee Marts—you was raisin' hell with Payson's hands."

Uncle Billy Malone choked. "Here that, Clay? Damn' if that there button hadn't ought to be whupped, 'stead o' folks bragging 'cause he set fire to a handful of tents."

Dimly, Clay Braden heard, and smiled to himself, but his gaze was far away, sweeping over the broad expanse of grassland which was the Blue Basin range.

THE END

Careening Concord or puffing iron horse? Which would

STAGECOACH WEST!

By

FRANK BONHAM

conquer in the deadly struggle to span the wild frontier?

Callahan's knife slashed the tugs free

BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL $2.50 VALUE

The Spy

CALLAHAN stood before the railroad shack with one foot on a crate, slowly smoking a cigar while he watched a dispatcher ramrod the last of a gang of workmen onto a flatcar. The alkali-crusted work-engine, smelling of heated iron and leaking steam and rusty water, bleated once.

The dispatcher stood with his fists on his hips, disciplining the men with his eyes. "Don't look like you were going to a wake," he said. "What happened last night ain't going to happen again. Those Indian hounds won't get the chance. They'll be a cavalry detail waiting at end-of-track this morning."

The train whistled again, the dispatcher waved and the short line of cars loaded with men and materials pulled off into the lavender sagebrush hills. In the cool distance of early morning Callahan saw the vague backbone of the Rockies. Striding back to his office, the dispatcher saw Craig Callahan. He frowned. "I suppose it's a job?"

"Union Pacific man said you were laying track into the mountains," Callahan said.

"We are, but we ain't hiring." He walked past the crate, but Callahan pointed at a rusting pyramid of rails.

"Are those regulation?"

". . . They're lighter than regulation," the foreman said. "Why?"

"They looked lighter," Callahan shrugged. "Reckon they'll stand up to mountain travel?"

The railroad man examined the large, dark-haired man in the spotted calico shirt and brown trousers. He seemed to look for irony in the bluff features. Callahan's eyes looked back at him with sober interest, gray eyes with a graining of lines at the outer corners. He looked rough and self-reliant, but he seemed respectful.

"Yes," the dispatcher said, with iron patience. "I think they will hold up or the company wouldn't be using them."

"It's Far-Western, isn't it?"

The man nodded. "Hoagland and Lamerick. What's your name, mister?"

"Callahan. I've worked on southern lines." He smiled and extended his hand. "You're—?"

"Duff," the foreman said, unwillingingly. "Well, Callahan, there's nothing for you. We're going slowly. Coloradoans aren't as free with their money as you might have heard, so the company's selling bonds as it goes."

"If I could talk to Superintendent Braga," Callahan said. "I worked with him and Mr. Hoagland on a job in Texas."

"Braga's at Reserve. That's the town we're building to. General offices are there."

Smiling, Callahan straightened. "Excuse all the questions. I just got into Bitter Creek last night. I'd like to get located. Mr. Hoagland would be at Reserve, too, I expect?"

"He happens to be in town. We've got an office here, too. I wouldn't bother him, Callahan. If I were you, I wouldn't bother me any more, either. There's no work for you, but there's plenty for me. Good morning."

"Good morning," Callahan said. "Oh, if you see Braga, tell him I'll be looking him up. And say that he couldn't whip me again, not with me sober. But he'll have his chance."

There was a gap of silence, and then Duff spoke sharply, but Callahan was crossing the Union Pacific tracks, from which the narrow-gage branch swerved

at this point, and he moved northward into the village.

CALLAHAN moved along beneath grayed wooden awnings. Trees had been set out when the U.P. came through ten years before, but they were still scarcely higher than the buildings. This Western Colorado plain was high, and the soil was cold and reluctant. Bitter Creek was a small but prosperous cowtown with a dowry of freighting to Reserve, where miners outfitted for the mountains.

Callahan was staying at the Territorial House, where, he had learned, Marsh Hoagland had his local office. He walked toward the hotel through a stirring of early-morning activity. A shopkeeper, vigorously sweeping boardwalk, gave him a curious stare. A turnout rattled from a livery barn into the street and from a freight corral came a hard volley of hoofbeats and a teamster's shout. Callahan waited for a wagon-and-trailer outfit to rumble by, and crossed to the yellow-fronted hotel, tall and narrow as a door.

He told the desk clerk, "I'm looking for Far-Western."

"Two-oh-eight," the man said. "They don't open till eight, you know."

"Mr. Hoagland rooms there?"

"When he's in town. But don't—"

"I wouldn't think of it," Callahan agreed.

He breakfasted in the dining room on fried potatoes, steak and coffee. An apple pie in a cheescloth case caught his eye and he finished on it. It was now seven. He had two men to see. One was Hoagland. The other operated a stage line from Bitter Creek to Reserve: A man named Gentry. It being immaterial which he saw first, Callahan decided to see whether stage men rose earlier than railroad men.

When he went out again, the town had awakened by a few more degrees. Through brisk sidewalk traffic he walked south to the edge of town. There was a large corral here and a small adobe building with a porte-cochere at the side. Just beyond were the steel streaks of the U.P. He entered the front door, but the waiting room and small post-office were empty. Callahan rapped on the counter.

A back door opened and a large, unshaven man in trousers, underwear and no shirt looked out at him. He was thumbing a suspender strap over his shoulder. "Wish for something?" he asked.

"I'm looking for Roy Gentry. If I'm early—"

"Come on back," the man said. "I'm Gentry. Will you have a bait of breakfast?"

"I'd admire some coffee," Callahan said easily.

It was a middle-aged, futile-looking room, Callahan thought. In the corners, a bachelor's broom had seen, heard and disclosed no evil. The rug resembled a very old toupee; an iron cookstove beside the sink was crusted with grease and rust. The bed had not been made, and probably would not be. An old mahogany commode beside an outer door bulged with boots and clothing.

Gentry pulled a skillet from the oven. "I could throw in some more side-pork as easy as not."

A large man, the back of his shoulders were densely haired. Callahan looked quickly for the key to him, and decided it was casualness: Don't hurry a man like Gentry, or he would turn mulish. His hair was worn far down his neck, though he was nearly bald, and his arms were massive. He commenced amputating fat rashers of bacon, and Callahan said, "Thanks, I've eaten."

"Staying at a hotel?"

"The Territorial."

"Used to stay there myself, until I got to runnin' into railroad men every day. Maybe I'm choosy. I started bachin'."

CALLAHAN left his hat on a chair and raised the lid of a blue enamel coffee pot. It was deep with ancient grounds. He started to throw them out, but Gentry said, "Whoop, whoops!" and took the pot from him. "That's the mother," he explained. He added six tablespoons of coarsely-ground coffee and handed it back, smiling. "That's the mother. Orphan coffee ain't worth swillin'."

Callahan chuckled; adding water, he placed the pot on the stove. "This is a friendly town," he observed. "A visitor gets asked to breakfast before you know whether he wants to buy a ticket or sell you a wooden nutmeg."

"Food's cheap," Gentry said easily.

While the room filled with the woody smoke of bacon, the stage man set a small table of splintery deal. Suddenly the room began to tremble. A low growl of thunder seemed to rise from the floor. Gentry strode to the window and yanked out a stick which had supported a pane of the double-hung window. It crashed down but continued to rattle.

"Gol-dang brimstone-burning junkheaps!" he said angrily.

He stood there in snaffled fury until the eastbound passenger train roared past the window. A fine sift of dust shook from the muslin ceiling. Five red passenger cars whipped past the window. Then there were only dust and smoke and a few sparks whirling down.

"There's a well-ballasted road," breathed Callahan, the spell leaving him. "In another year you'll be able to shave in here and not cut yourself."

"Another year of this," said Roy Gentry, "and I'll be doing my damndest to cut my throat."

He set the table and poured mugs of coffee. "Too strong for you?"

"I only drink for the effect," Callahan said. He stirred sandy gray sugar into the coffee and watched Gentry begin to eat. "Don't think much of railroads, do you?"

"Callahan," Gentry said, "I used to think there was nothing meaner ner dirtier than a drunken Piute Injun. Shows you how wrong a man can be," he said.

"And now you're right on the point of having a railroad to compete with. Going to lick them?"

"I count on the horse-sense of the good people of Colorado Territory to keep me in business," Gentry declared. "Who'd pay money to have cinders blowed in his eyes, sparks in his hair, and be cremated in live steam every time the damned thing jumps the tracks, when he could ride a stage?"

"Spoken like a staging man," said Callahan. "Will you tell me something else? Why do you let them build the road, when you've got a charter that guarantees you exclusive franchise in this area?"

Gentry drank coffee, investigated with his tongue the hiding places of food about his gums, and asked thoughtfully, "How'd you know about that?"

"I spent a month at Reserve finding out things from the County Recorder. You see, I'm thinking of buying a piece of your stage company." Callahan smiled into the frosty gray eyes.

Gentry wiped his mouth on his cuff. "Now *you* tell *me* something. Why is everybody in Bitter Creek in such a hell-sweat to invest in a line that's about to be drove to the wall?"

"I didn't know they were."

"You didn't know about this young widow-woman? Winans, I think she calls herself?"

"No. My money's from a little coup in mining. I hate money to gather dust. I've been over your road a dozen times as a passenger this last month. Some of the fords ought to be bridged, but I'd say it was in pretty fair shape. Winans," Callahan reflected. "Where's she from?"

"The Coast. Her late husband was

with Birch lines. Fine man, Birch."

"How old is she?" Callahan blew on his coffee.

"Your age, a little younger. Damned sight prettier. I'm taking her to Reserve today on a tour of inspection."

Callahan pointed a finger. "Look out, Roy! She sounds more like the widow of a railroad man, to me. You wouldn't like to have Marsh Hoagland for a partner, would you? A fifty-one per cent partner to vote the line into retirement? You've got them over a barrel if you ever exercise that franchise. They know it. Look out for her."

"I can tell right now you don't know Mrs. Winans. She's innocent as a baby. She was brought up in staging. She wants to stay with it."

"Have you given her a commitment?" Callahan locked his shouting anxiety behind a drawl. It was a guess—that Mrs. Winans was fronting for a railroad a-tremble to legalize its position. But it was a good guess. Hoagland could be crude and direct, but he also knew the bait to use for a trap.

"She's made me an offer," said Gentry easily. "A good price, but she wants control. And I ain't so green as to make a hoss-breaker out of myself."

What Callahan had in mind involved control, also. But he did not mention it. He finished his coffee and rose. "Would you have room for another passenger on that stage today?"

"Sho'."

Callahan said, "Then I'll be here at nine. I'm talking cash, Gentry. I'm no fly-by-night business man. I'm dead serious."

Gentry pumped water into a tea-kettle. "And I'm serious about not selling over forty-nine per cent, young fella. Glad to have you along, though. Don't try to beat my time with Kitty Winans, either."

He chuckled. He probably thought he was joking, Callahan reflected.

WALKING back to the Territorial House, Callahan was aware of a feeling of disappointment. He had contrived carefully how he would act once he came out into the open. He had not been more painstaking when he laid out the contours of the ill-fated road Hoagland had built in East Texas. First the partnership with Gentry, for ammunition—the franchise. Then the campaign against Marsh Hoagland.

But Gentry was a tough and prideful man. He must know he was whipped in a lone fight against Far-Western. He could denounce railroads and send his prayers up to the staging gods. Yet, when he faced it, he must know he would not last a month after traffic began to move into Reserve by rail.

And still he could be independent as a cavalry corporal about selling! He would stand in his undershirt and tell a man with money to invest how it was going to be. And it could not be that way, because the only need Craig Callahan had for a stage line was the control of a clause in its charter:

". . . And that furthermore the operator, his heirs and assigns, shall for a period of fifteen years have full and exclusive right to carry passenger traffic within the legal bounds of San Jose County, as established on Map Number 393 Page —"

That meant that Far-Western was off-limits by a matter of nine years in attempting to tap the heavy freight and passenger traffic from Reserve, head of navigation below the mountain mines.

It meant specifically that a man could stop construction on the line, and, for once, Hoagland would take the beating.

In his hotel room, Callahan crowded his belongings into a small carpeted trunk. He loosened his belt; drawing his belly in, he moved up the money belt he wore next to his skin. It was heavy and sweat-inducing. He adjusted his shirt and tight-

ened the bell again. He put on a coat.

Suddenly he was eager for the encounter with Marsh Hoagland. He wanted to see Hoagland's face as he gave him the news—at least half-true—that he had gone into partnership with Roy Gentry. It was entirely possible that the threat would bring Hoagland to time as quickly as the fact.

He trod the carpetless hall to the lobby and turned up the stairs. Hoagland's

Callahan

room was above. As he turned from the upper landing into a yellow-papered hall he saw the door of Room 208 open. A young woman came out. She was a brunette and extremely neat and pretty. Where Callahan loomed with one hand on the spindled rail, it was gloomy. The girl approached him with a handbag hanging from her left wrist. Her heels rang crisply in the hall. She wore a long, lightly-hooped skirt with a snug bodice. Her waist was small and supple. The gray silk gleamed like metal; it sounded to Callahan like the rustle of paper money. A row of buttons down the front of her bodice winked at him, and the long skirt flowed down from her hips with a gay sideward lilt.

For the instant he was dull as a wooden Indian. It came too suddenly: The girl slipping from Hoagland's room at breakfast time. The heart-catching prettiness of her.

Then, in sudden awareness of him, she started and made a little sound. She touched him briefly with dark-eyed horror. Her step lagged, and in the next moment she tripped over a break in the flooring. He heard her gasp as he reached to catch her by the waist. He experienced a soft and fragrant collision, but an instant later she was pulling away. He knew one thing now: Her waist was not boned to such slenderness.

Callahan said, "Easy there, Mrs. Winans!"

She touched the wall with her fingers. "Do we—know each other, sir?"

Callahan removed his hat. "I'm Craig Callahan. You were described to me."

"By whom?" She tried to smile; her lip trembled.

"By a mutual friend."

"Our mutual friend failed to describe you, Mr. Callahan."

"I'm in transportation."

She was utterly off-balance, and he boldly inspected her. Her hair, uncovered by a bonnet, had been encouraged to glistening darkness by a brush; her eyes were a clear russet-brown. He perceived that there was not a straight line in her body. She was small and deep-bosomed. She was the cleanest-smelling human being he had ever stood close to.

All at once she moved to pass him, raising her skirt with one hand. "Good morning, Mr. Callahan. You have the wrong Mrs. Winans."

He stood aside, watching the whispering gray silk float down the stairs. "And you, Mrs. Winans, have the wrong friends," he said gravely.

AGAIN the door of Two-oh-eight opened, and a large man in tan trousers and a brown corduroy coat placed one foot in the hall and glanced toward

the stairs. It was Hoagland—cigar, fist-like chin, displeased eyes. No changes there. Callahan leaned against the rail and let recognition come slowly. Finally he saw Hoagland's big chest deflate with an expulsion of held breath.

"Well, well, Craig," he said. "Duff was right. I thought he must have misunderstood."

"Lots of people do," Callahan said, moving toward him.

Hoagland let him come to within ten feet. He said, "It may not show, but I'm wearing a gun."

"I'm not, so relax. That doesn't mean I'm helpless."

Marsh Hoagland smiled. "Braga said you were."

"Ask him again one of these days."

"Did you come out here just to lick Tom Braga?"

"No. To lick you."

Big and lounging and suspicious, Hoagland watched him stop two feet away. Then he stirred. "Come in."

Sitting by a window, Craig Callahan took the whiskey the railroad man offered. "Hear you've got a pardner."

"Lamerick? Banking man from Denver. He's a bear-cat for finance. What do you want?"

"An introduction to your friend, first off."

"Lamerick?"

"If that was Lamerick who just left. The brunette with the deep lower lip."

Hoagland's eyes went away. "I don't get you."

"Mrs. Winans."

"You mean the woman next door. Yes, I heard her go out."

"Marshal, Marshal!" Craig grinned.

Hoagland sat down, but when he crossed his legs he was no longer holding his glass, but a pepper-pot derringer. The five barrels, like a dismal and precocious clover-leaf, stared at Callahan. "This town's no different from any other," he said. "A woman's no better than her reputation. Help me keep hers clean." The gun went back to an inside coat pocket, but his eyes stayed with Callahan, bitter as smoke.

"Your love life," Callahan said, "is your own business, so long as it doesn't interfere with my business life."

He let it lie there. Hoagland did not pick it up. He looked genuinely puzzled.

"Forget about my love life," he stated finally. "What's this about your licking me?"

"It will be that," Callahan said, "or a deal with you."

Color flashed through Hoagland's hard features. "It'll be neither, and you're going out of here on your hip-pockets if you can't talk plain!"

He thumped his glass down. Callahan did not heat.

"Building another railroad like the Texas and Arkansas, Marsh?" he smiled.

"How I build this road is no concern of yours," Hoagland said. "Duff said you were crabbing about lightweight rails. Get it through your skull, Callahan, that having been assistant engineer on the T. & A. doesn't make you my special counsellor on this job."

"I'm going to be a little better than that. I'm going to be chief engineer."

Hoagland made a wry bass oath, and shaking his head, he poured whiskey into his glass.

Callahan leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "And when I finish this one, I'm taking the crew back and put that Texas junkyard on an operating basis."

Hoagland said drily, "Get out of here."

"IT ISN'T that I like working for you, mister," Callahan said. "It's that I like being able to go where I want to. There's just one state in the Union where I can't go: Texas. They passed a

resolution about us at Austin last winter. Nobody who worked on that line, except laborers, can set foot in the state of Texas again. How do you like that, Marsh? How do you like your name written in a big book that you're the worst builder of railroads that ever came down the pike?"

Hoagland said, "They got their railroad. If they wanted to be niggerdly about buying bonds, we had to build the best we could."

"Strap-iron rails and four-by-four ties! They bought better than that. You got your subsidies and bonuses and your cut of the bonds. You let them take one train over it, and then you drifted before it could fall apart."

"You got yours, too," Hoagland snapped. "You got five thousand on top of your salary. Give it back if it's shaming you."

"I saved it for a purpose. I could give it back to the bond-holders, but that wouldn't help them much. I'm putting it to better use. I've bought into a stage line."

Hoagland nodded slowly. "Just as well you can't go back to Texas. They lock up lunatics down there."

Callahan, setting the whiskey on the sill, rose. "What do they do to franchise-jumpers?" He walked past the railroad man, who turned after a moment. Callahan was at the door.

"Gentry won't make trouble," Hoagland said quietly, "and you'd damned well better not. You hear what I say?"

He was on his feet, his long arms hanging, veins corded in his hands. In his face burned the same florid fury he had worn the night they split up in Wichita Falls. A controlled man, he kept his temper on short leash. But when he cut the leash off, he was brutal and blind as a hurt grizzly. Looking at him, Callahan thought: If Braga hadn't been there that night, I'd be dead! If the work boss had not been in the railroad shack when Craig came hunting trouble, drunk on fury and liquor, Hoagland would have shot him. Callahan remembered how Braga had thrust Hoagland away from his racked rifle and taken the younger man for himself.

And now he said, "You aren't dealing with an old stage man, Marsh. You're dealing with me. I've got the franchise. Now I'll get a lawyer. If you build another mile of track on this road, it will be standard, and I'll go along to see that you bridge the gullies instead of swimming them."

He started to turn, one hand on the knob, one in his pocket, but suddenly swung back. Hoagland's hand was inside his coat. His face was a mottled red-gray. Craig Collahan's hand came from his pocket. A nickeled house-gun gleamed in it.

"Turn around, Marsh," he said. "I meant I was *practically* unarmed. This is only a .32. I've heard it takes a whole hatful of slugs to kill a man. Shall we see?"

Hoagland slowly drew his hand from his coat. He turned to the window. He glanced up at the ceiling, his shoulders taut. In a moment he spoke. "I've heard a .45 slug will knock a man flat on his back. Next time we'll see about that."

"Next time," Callahan said, "I'll be wearing a gun where you can see it. I don't think you'll throw down on me then."

A FEW minutes later, in his own room, Callahan had a moment he was overdue for.

He had taken a holstered Army revolver from his bag and tossed the gun on the bed while he latched the heavy buckle of the belt. The gun pressed a shallow matrix into the blanket, its brass shining, the ruts of the bone handle dark with use. In the field, it had been as familiar to him as his transit. Railroads seemed to in-

vade by choice the passes sacred to Indians. They bridged the streams where they fished or berried. He remembered the dispatcher's invocation that morning, and knew this construction job was no different from any other: It would go forward with due attention to security.

But it was the first time he had had anything but Indians in mind when he buckled on the gun. From this moment, Callahan knew he could not walk down the street or enter a saloon without a gun at his fingertips. He held the Colt on his palm. I've got five thousand dollars, he reflected. I don't have to do this. I could buy a piece of mining property. I could homestead. But I could never railroad again; I've been blackballed from the trade. And I couldn't set foot in Texas. Not that I need to; but telling a man he can't isn't the way to keep him from wanting to.

All these things he had chewed on before he ever set out to track down Marsh Hoagland. They had never seemed so pointed as now, when he tipped the revolver down and slipped it into the basket-woven holster. Let's go, the gesture said.

Until stage-time, he did some purchasing of things scarce in Reserve. At five minutes to nine, he carried his trunk to the stage office. Passengers sat in the sallow spring sunlight before the station. Mrs. Winans was not among them. Under the porte-cochère, Roy Gentry was polishing an oil painting on the olive-green coach panel. He was dressed in a black suit too small for him. He had shaved, cutting his deep sideburns to scimitar-sharpness.

He put Callahan's trunk in the rear boot and consulted a pocket watch. "Mrs. Winans had best shake her pretty limb. Look here," he said. Callahan went around to the rear of the Concord coach with him. They inspected a splintered hole above the leather flap of the boot. "Arrowhead?" he asked.

Gentry nodded. "Coming in last night. Bill Fox says they've been yippin' on the ridges like coyotes for two weeks. Utes; we call 'em Pie-utes over here. It don't make them any tamer. Not when they're abuildin' railroads through their huntin' grounds." He shrugged. "This was just a postcard, I expect. 'Havin' fine time. Wisht you were dead.' "

"Why don't you demand an escort? The railroad draws guards."

"I sent down for escort last night. Not the first time. Captain Elmo Stanger's quartered at Reserve with a few volunteer troopers. I told him to by-God be at Cross Hollows station this afternoon or he'd get a rump-full of stagecoaches! Don't figger he'll be there, though," he added.

In a few minutes a boy came from a hotel with Kathleen Winans' bags. Bill Fox, the driver, appeared, an old man dressed in smoked buckskin pants and shirt, looking like an ancient buffalo-hunter. He carried a copper bugle slung over his shoulder and a knife protruded from his boot. He mounted to the box and the expressman began passing up parcels, and finally the iron-bound express box.

Gentry moved among the passengers. "You gentlemen are armed? Don't want to frighten anybody, but please have your sidearms handy."

Into the yard hurried a small, slender person in gray silk, whose black velvet bonnet, clinging to the back of her head, danced as she hurried toward the coach. She gave the stage man a pert, sparkling glance.

"I'm always the last," she confessed. "Forgive me?"

Callahan complacently waited for her denunciation. Gentry said with gruff good-nature, "We generally leave by the clock, ma'am, not by dead reckoning. Saved you Number One, Kitty, by Mr. Callahan. You two can argue."

She saw Callahan. Her mouth drew in strained surprise. ". . . That's—Thank you. I don't think—"

"Thought you'd met, by now. Mrs. Winans, Mr. Callahan."

He urged her into the coach with a big, scarred hand. The door slammed behind Craig. The coach was half-full, the jumper seats unoccupied. In rigid silence, he and the girl sat while Gentry handed the lines up to Bill Fox and himself mounted to the left of the box. Fox's horn crowed. The coach sagged back on its bullhide springs and lurched forward. A moment later they banged across the Union Pacific lines and hit out through the gray morning sage.

THE girl sat by the window, very young, very pretty, very nervous. Callahan saw the new gold ring on her finger. His back came from the leather cushion as he reached across her.

"I'll tie the curtain back if you like."

"Thank you." He could just hear her over the chuckling of the sand-boxes and grinding tires.

He linked the ties. The sorghum odor of sage whipped at them. Broken foothills fenced the east, rising beyond a plain. They passed strings of freight wagons rumbling toward Reserve. On a far rise, Callahan glimpsed a raw cut where the railroad topped a mole-like ridge.

Her fingers meshed in her lap, Mrs. Winans suddenly said, "Mr. Callahan, I'd like to explain something. Mr. Hoagland is an old friend of my father's. I'm not interested in railroading, and I'm certainly not interested in—in Mr. Hoagland."

"You don't have to explain to me."

"You led me to think that I did."

"I'm sorry. I've had trouble with Hoagland. I was acting on the theory that any friend of his is an enemy of mine. Did Gentry tell you we have something in common?"

Her head turned. "Really?"

"We're both interested in buying into his line. And Mr. Hoagland won't care so much about that caper."

"You, too? Why?"

"I like horses."

"I see. My husband was in staging in California. He just about died two years ago."

"You married young," Callahan observed.

"I suppose."

"What did your husband die of?" Callahan's smile was a softness at the corners of his mouth.

His eyes watched her intently.

"... They—they didn't—" She touched the bosom of her gown. "Pneumonia, they thought."

"A pity," Callahan sighed. "Hard to adjust, I know. Birthdays recall the departed ... anniversaries. When was your anniversary, by the way?"

"The ... the Fourth of July, I think, the girl said softly."

"Not sure?"

She pressed her lips together. "What are you trying to find out? What business is this of yours?"

"What you're trying to do. Wreck Gentry?"

Her eyes sparked. "I consider that a crude and—"

"I consider spying crude," Callahan said. "You're trying to get control of this stage-line. Then you'll sell the franchise to the railroad. Isn't that the whole deal in a nutshell?"

Her mouth was drab with fury or shock. Fire glinted in her eyes. "Except for disturbing the other passengers," she said, "I should slap you and ask that you be removed at the next station. We have nothing else to say to each other from now on."

"Except," Callahan sighed, "that it's too bad. There ought to be an ordinance against girls so pretty going into syping. Poor old Centry. ... He's being taken, hook, line and sinker."

Battle of Giants

THEY reached Rifle Hill relay-station, where a new team was latched into the traces. On they rolled, stopping for thirty minutes to lunch at Bridge Creek swing. The country was crumpling into higher hills gouged with canyons. Patches of timber birthmarked the tawny rimrock. Scented with the mountain incense of cedar and pine, the clear air was strapping.

Bill Fox, still chewing jerked venison, crawled to the box, and Gentry came around to the porch of the small station. "Ladies, will you take the inside seats?"

He escorted the three women to the coach. Then he spoke briefly to the men. "We pick up the military at Cross Hollows, eight mile from here. But this is all Injun country. I've seated the ladies away from the windows. None of you gents looks chicken-livered. Ain't, are you?"

He slapped on the back an assayer from Reserve, who looked queasy, to Callahan, but tried to grin; chuckling, he went off to take his place atop the coach.

The coach slung along through dry washes and over hardscrabble ridges. The going toughened. On the long grade descending into Cross Hollows Valley, they halted to rough-lock a rear wheel. Lurching on in a red fog of dust, they flattened into the shallow mountain valley. Near a black peninsula of timber running out into the basin, Callahan spotted the stage station. It was a brown box of log walls backed up by a couple of lean-to barns. A stack of wild hay was fenced off from deer and hungry stock. Two men were working with horses in a corral, and before the station were racked a dozen or more saddled horses. Fox's horn cried a bronze warning. The brakes squalled. Dust rolled by, cleared off, and Gentry was there to open the door.

"Twenty minutes," he said.

Callahan observed the men on the porch stare at the ladies as they entered the stage station. Sun and privation had been at them, scouring their bodies of fat, darkening their faces. They were a gaunt crew of volunteer Territorials, underpaid and underfed. Their shirts were a uniform pale-blue; hats, trousers and boots were catch-as-catch-can. A tall, sober man, slender and dark as a cheroot, came from the interior of the station. He wore a captain's bars on his shoulders.

"Your boys look gaunt," Gentry told him.

"We've been riding since dawn," the captain said.

Gentry introduced Callahan. "Captain Elmo Stanger," he said. They shook hands, Callahan noting the man's gray-black hair, a distinguishing note against his face, which was that of a man of thirty. Stanger was neat and precise and stern of eye and mouth. He held a fuming cigar and kept turning it in his fingers.

"What's up?" Gentry asked.

"Raid on the railroad camp yesterday afternoon. Three woodcutters were scalped. We've been on their trail all day. I make it twenty-thirty bucks."

"They come this way?"

"We're not here for the scenery."

Callahan noted a muscle tauten under the heavy flesh of Gentry's jaw. "I didn't expect you were," he said. "I expected you'd meet us here as I asked. But I'd like to know what to expect on the way in."

"Expect anything," Stanger said crisply. "You're on your own, by the way." He turned to the men. "Fall in!"

There was a too-quick scrambling. Callahan watched the cavalryman stride out to stand before the troopers. I'd hate to

serve under you, he thought. I'd hate to soldier under any man who finds time to shave on patrol. Captain Stanger's jaws gleamed like cordovan.

Gentry knocked his pipe against his heel and walked out to take Stanger by the arm. "Say that once more."

A SMALL fury pinched Stanger's face. "I can't give escort, that's what I mean! Pull off my men when we're about to close with the Utes? Lay over here, if you're afraid to proceed."

"Look good on my mail report, wouldn't it? 'Mail held up because of Injun scare.'"

"I don't care what it looks like. I'm serving the Territory, not the Colorado Express Company."

"Captain," Callahan said.

The troopers' faces turned his way. Stanger glanced about. "What is it?"

"We've got ladies aboard. It would hardly do to make them spend the night in Indian country, would it, when we can take them safely into town?"

"It's hard to say where the risk is greater," Stanger said. "But I can tell you I won't base my decision on what you or any other frightened stage passenger tells me."

He cracked an order at the cavalrymen. They broke for their horses. Callahan watched him, saying nothing. Gentry began to swear. "By God," he barked, "the governor will hear about this!"

Mounted, Stanger swung by them. "I hope he does, Gentry. Maybe we'd get decent subsidies for the railroad, then."

Fifteen minutes later the stagecoach ground back onto the county road, running smoothly with a fresh team across the valley. Reserve lay another thirty miles within the hills. The light was draining from the sky. In the dusty murk within the coach, Callahan took his Colt from the holster and laid it on his lap, under the skirt of his coat.

A finger touched his arm. Kathleen Winans was frowning at the half-obscured gun. "Do you have to do that?"

"I feel better doing it."

In a field of bright skunk-cabbage, they passed a freight outfit squared up for the night with the stock penned inside. Fires smoked and the wagon-master shook his head as they passed. A liver-spotted hound rushed the coach-team.

Fatigue invaded the coach. For nine hours the passengers had been pummeled and beaten by the brutalities of the road. Callahan's back was numb with rubbing against the horsehair cushions. His brain hummed. His head began to sag forward, and just as it seemed he was to get some rest, Roy Gentry's bass shout roused the whole coach.

"KEEP 'er rolling!" Gentry yelled. "Gol-dang it, don't let her stop!"

Thrusting his head out the window, Callahan saw a ruddiness on the flanks of the horses. Coming out of the turn, they swung left, out of his vision, and he had a clear view of the road. They were running into a bottleneck in a long valley, formed by a dike of sharply upstanding rocks. It was almost like a dam, rubbled at the base and sprinkled with aspen and small pine. The road burst through a gap in it, hardly twice the width of the coach itself. And the entire gap seemed to be afire.

The whole embrasure trembled with flame, yellow-orange in the late sunset. It fell shatteringly on Callahan. Stupid with shock, he sat there with the long barrel of his Colt resting on the ledge of the window.

Gentry's rifle rammed a black bolt of sound through the air: It shattered into a scream against a rock. Fox's soprano yelled:

"I can turn 'em, Roy!"

"Turn 'em, then, but don't slow!"

The coach left the graded roadbed and

turned back. It was in a rutted stand of spring grass, running boggily, and the smoke of burning hay filled the coach. In the florid light, Callahan saw the same face on all his fellow-passengers: The dismal mask of fear.

Somewhere a gun cracked. He heard a ball strike the leather belly of the coach, the deep luggage-boot behind him. Mrs Winans fell across him as the coach slewed over. She was sobbing.

Callahan locked his left arm about her. "Show those Piutes something!" he said. He had no idea what. But he made his arm steady and gripped the window with the butt of his pistol.

All at once the air fluttered with arrows. They went by like feathers. They thudded against the boot and a horse screamed.

Gentry's rifle broke loose again. It was a heavy-calibered Henry, a fifteen-shot wonder. Glancing out, Callahan saw the Utes, jigging silhouettes against the flames. Already the fire was lower, the hay burning hotly. Callahan picked out a leader and tried to steady the gun. It kicked at his wrist. The Indian kept coming. He fired again, and as the smoke whipped away he saw the riderless pony.

He lied in Mrs. Winans' ear: "Two of 'em, ma'am!"

The assayer was firing, now. Riding on the front seat, he was able to fire into the Utes without twisting. The coach filled with bitter fumes of powder. The Winans girl pulled away, waxen.

"Can I do anything?"

"Shells in my pocket," Callahan said. "Extra guns under the seat."

He made the Colt slug thunderously across the meadow. Fanning out, the Indians showed their strength: There were at least two-dozen riders in fighting trim, shirtless, buffalo robes belted at the waist and flopping behind them. Feathered lances fluttered in the dark wind. In their shaggy, meagre ponies, Craig saw the only encouragement: A good stage team could outrun a poor saddle-horse in a fair race.

Gentry's carbine boomed steadily. The passengers made a crackling thunder with their side-arms. There was a pause while the stage-man reloaded. A moment later the coach swerved. It rocked through a sharp turn and struck back at the road. Kathleen Winans took Callahan's smoking Colt and gave him a fresh revolver. He studied the Indians milling on the road ahead of them, directly in the Concord's path. Gentry's gun opened again. It rolled and hammered as fast as one man could pull a lever and squeeze a trigger, and Callahan felt a glad lift: He saw several of the bunched warriors take the slugs, the whole group splitting, and when the Utes swerved away four horses ran without riders.

The hay had burned itself out: Callahan saw the fine silt of embers on the road. Smoke floated across the valley on the breeze. He felt the surge of the stage-ponies' gathered strength. The team was running wild.

Callahan pointed the barrel of the Colt at a group of riders to the right of the road. When they rushed, he was ready for them. They were like wild dogs snapping at the horses' legs. He fired until the gun clicked empty. He dropped it on the seat and Mrs. Winans was pressing another into his grip. The hard spine of the attack snapped. The Utes were in each other's way, trying to close and drive a lance into a pony or sink a feathered shaft. The passengers and the roaring madman atop the coach kept them off balance. Smoke whipped into the coach, the sweet smoke of burned hay.

Callahan fired until a slab of stone came between him and the Indians. The coach was through the gap. It was striking into a winding, easy grade up a hillside.

Watching the back road he suddenly knew the blood-feast was finished. The

hangover had set in. Smoke and sunset curtained the gap in the broken stone wall. Presently Fox brought the horses into a trot.

AN HOUR after sunset, her lamps gleaming, the stagecoach entered the canyon-town of Reserve. There was a sharpening quality in entering an almost-strange town at night, and Craig tilted his head to watch red-brick storefronts flash by, and the bright, steamy facades of saloons. The team minced into a narrow passage between two slot-like buildings and halted, blown, in a stage-yard. Hostlers took the nervous team and groped for harness snaps. A limping baggage man unbuckled the flap of the rear boot.

Finally Gentry was alone with the Winans girl and Callahan. He smiled ruefully. "Investor line forms at the right," he said.

"I'd like to be first in that line," the girl said.

"You'll have to stand on my shoulders to get there," Callahan said. "That was only the acid test, Gentry: You've got a real stage line."

Gentry wagged his head. "Then I reckon you're both crazy. Well, it's late. Callahan, I've got a spare room you can share with the rats. Mrs. Winans, I'll find you a room. The Mountain House is good."

"I'd like a suite, if there is such a thing," Mrs. Winans said. "You know, a little sitting room I can use for an office."

Callahan was weary. He picked up his trunk, balanced it on his shoulder and said, "You load a Colt with the best, ma'am. We'll take on the Sioux Nation some time."

"Not if I can help it. Good-night, Mr. Callahan." She turned her back to him.

In the room, Callahan lay on the cot with his long legs falling over the side. The red brick walls absorbed the weak candle light. The lurch and sag of the stagecoach were still in him. He slept. When he awoke, the candle was a curl of black twine in a puddle of grease. He lay thinking that he was lucky to be here at all; the thought led into bitter recollection of Captain Elmo Stanger. He recalled the faces of his men—like a pack of hungry hounds. It would be pleasant to have the upper hand with him, just once.

Mrs. Winans had taken it well. Scared, but hanging on. In the cold dusk of the room he projected her image: How she had looked coming out of Hoagland's room . . . how she had said, "Mr. Hoagland is an old friend of my father's. . . ."

And of your's, Miss Kitty, thought Callahan.

It was the core of a hard problem. Gentry should know she was on the railroad's payrool, that she was Hoagland's woman and trying to trap him. It was only fair to him as well as to Gentry. But he could not go to Gentry with what he knew. He could not do it. Admitting that, he uncovered the edge of a hurt in himself. An impersonal hurt, perhaps—that any girl so attractive could have such morals. It made a man want to regard all women in the same light. If you could not believe in one like her, what kind could you believe in?

With a grunt, he came off the cot and poured water in a graniteware bowl from a wooden bucket. Refreshed and brushed, he consulted his watch. Nine-thirty. He ran a cleaning rag down the barrel of his Colt, reloaded with care and left the room.

IN THE baggage room, behind the ticket office, he encountered a dozen stage men listening to Bill Fox drunkenly reciting an Indian story. Callahan perceived something: Gentry was living in the past, in the golden era of staging. He had surrounded himself with old men from the Oxbow Route, the Birch lines, the Central Overland. Laid end to end, the years of these twelve men would reach back halfway to Nero.

". . . damned if a mule wasn't down in the traces," Fox was chattering. He snatched the knife from his boot. "I told my guard, 'Hold 'em!' and I clumb down. Arrows thicker'n fleas on a dog's back!"

Passing Gentry, Callahan murmured, "Like a drink?"

Gentry took his hat and they went outside. A fine mountain mist had descended suddenly from the crags. The brick fronts of the buildings shone wetly. A slate church steeple prodded the mist. "National Saloon serves the freshest hard-boil' eggs," said the stage man "Whiskey's about the same everywhere."

They walked upstreet a block. Wagons and rigs jogged past. Most of the business houses seemed to be assayers' laboratories, trading on the avalanche of ore samples from the mines. Of brick and volcanic tuffa, the town looked rich and permanent.

Callahan was suddenly aware of a phenomenon at the hitch rack of the National Saloon. Gentry, too, must have seen it, for he hesitated. In the golden haze drifting before the saloon's big window stood a line of horses, dull with road dirt, each bearing a blanket roll behind the cantle.

"I don' know," Gentry growled. "Lot of railroad bums be drinking there, this being Saturday night. Let's try the Palace."

It was difficult to think of the stageman in the same instant with lack of courage. But Callahan knew the horses were those of Captain Stanger's squadron. ". . . You've got me honing for those hard-boiled eggs," he said.

The oval glass doors of the National swung in. In a smoky distance, a mirrowed wheel spun and a girl cried the bets. A mechanical piano and drum roared through, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home,* and girls and red-shirted miners shuffled behind a rope enclosure. The heavy walnut bar was backed with a glittering display of crystal. An impartial rail supported the boots of miners, freighters and business men, and Callahan saw a row of cavalry-spurred boots and followed them up to the exhausted, unshaven faces of the troopers. They had been here only a short while; dark yokes of moisture lay across their shoulders. At a table near the slowly-clicking wheel, he located Captain Stanger. The officer sat with a blond, thick-set man and a full-bosomed girl in a flounced dress.

"Let's pay our respects to the captain," Callahan told Gentry.

Gentry shook his head. "We'd be mobbed to hell and back if we tackled him and Braga."

Callahan had not recognized the old T. & A. work boss, Tom Braga. Now he saw the thick, creased neck rising into the tough blond hair, the flat ears and massive shoulders of the man. He watched the pair talk, Stanger gravely amused at something Braga was telling him. Wandering, the captain's eyes came to a sudden collision with Callahan's. Callahan absently removed his hat, ran his hand over his hair, and replaced it, not moving his eyes from the officer's face.

He said, "You know what to do about railroad towns, don't you? Lick a couple of good railroad men and then take it over . . ."

He went down the line of cocked hips at the bar, turning out through the tables to lay a hand on Braga's shoulder. Braga twisted to look up at him.

"Tom, how's the junk business?" Callahan asked.

Stanger's dark, sober face watched him, and the girl laughed softly.

Braga grinned. "Sit down, Craig. Got your message. Junk business is booming. . . . How're the horse manure kings of Colorado?"

"Well, we don't try to fool anybody about what we're selling."

Callahan took a chair but Gentry said, "Craig, I've got to see to the stock. Side door'll be open."

CALLAHAN looked at him. Gentry looked troubled, but kept his anger toward Stanger and Braga turned inward . . . as, Craig supposed, he had done with Hoagland from the start; and that was how they had managed to back him into this corner. "All right," he said.

"I heard you ran into some trouble today," Braga remarked. His eyes absently touched a scar above Callahan's right eyebrow, where the railroad man's own fist had broken the skin once. But Craig could not find a mark on Braga. The construction boss had a tough, masculine good looks, a man's-man handsomeness—heavy in the jaw, his eyes blue and seasoned with lines, a humorous mouth that never lost its good nature, even when a gauger had to be whipped for improperly spotting a half-mile of rails. Braga held a shot-glass in his right hand; his sleeves were rolled, and the hairs on his forearms gleamed golden.

"Trouble? A little," Callahan said. "The worst was having women with us."

Stanger said, "Don't say you weren't warned."

"We were given a choice of evils. That was what the military did for us."

As she raised her drink, the girl smiled at Callahan. "If we'd been properly introduced, I'd ask you to bring me a scalp next time."

She was with the captain, Callahan saw, not with Braga. He had not intended to introduce her, but now he said, "Callahan, is it? Shawn Miller, Callahan."

Callahan gallantly rose and bent over the hand she extended. She was a bold and attractive auburn-haired girl, probably not twenty. She had a pouting lower lip and wore dangling gold crosses as earrings; and Callahan hoped she took them off when she worked.

"It may not be too late yet to get you a scalp," he said. "Any preference as to color?"

Her dark, humorous eyes went to his own black hair. "Black is nice," she said. "'Black is the color of my true love's hair' . . ."

"Shawn," Stanger snapped, "we've got business to talk." He put his hand on the back of her chair.

"How many Indians did you kill, Mr. Callahan?" Shawn asked.

"Three."

"Your first?"

"Yes. We usually have a military escort in dangerous country. I think our escort was off on railroad business somewhere."

"Why, Elma!" Shawn exclaimed. "Weren't you to bring the stage in today?"

Stanger's face darkened. He leaned forward, his glass held between his fingertips. "Will you keep your civilian nose out of military matters?" he asked Callahan.

"Why didn't you tell me he was touchy?" Callahan asked Shawn.

"Sometimes he's terrible," she said. "But then, sometimes he's sweet." She put her hand over Stanger's, who drew it away.

Braga leaned back. "You mean we'd bribe a military man to neglect his duty?"

"That's how it used to be worked. Troops to guard the woodcutters, while freighters were murdered ten miles away."

The headlong music of the piano had resumed. Rising, Callahan looked at Stanger but extended a hand to Shawn. "I expect Miss Miller is off-limits to civilian personnel too, eh, Captain?"

As the girl rose, Stanger said, "Shawn—sit down."

BUT she was coming into Callahan's arms, her face tilted to smile at him. They moved away to the roped dancing enclosure. Callahan saw Stanger sitting at the table, staring at his drink, and Brag's mouth said something bitter to the officer; something biting.

"Don't you care whether you live to be an old man or not?" Shawn asked him. They elbowed into the pack of flounced dancing girls and intent miners.

"Not if I can spend my youth like this," Callahan grinned.

Shawn laughed softly. "You don't like my friend."

"No," agreed Craig.

"So," she pouted, "you dance with me to make him mad."

"Let's put it this way: If there were ten pretty girls in the room, and Stanger was with one of them, I'd dance with that one. But I didn't expect to draw the prettiest."

"You know," Shawn sighed, "I'd rather be lied to by a man like you than have a man like—well, any other man, tell me the truth."

She made him sit on a chair while she cleaned his cuts

"That makes two good liars in this couple, doesn't it?"

The professor wove a last tinkling run and reached for his beer. Leaving the floor, Shawn asked, "Married, Craig?"

"Not even a steady."

"Need a steady?"

"Only for tonight."

"That's too bad. I could have any miner in town, and I don't mean suckers. I could even have a cavalry captain. Or your friend, Braga, if I wanted him."

"Then what do you like about me?"

"Maybe I like the fact that they're both afraid of you," she told him.

At the table, she folded her hands, smiled brightly at Braga, then at the captain, and said, "Somebody took my drink."

"More on the way," Braga said. He squinted at Callahan. "So you came out to lick us. All by yourself?"

"No. I've got helpers. Several thousand of them."

Braga looked puzzled. Leaning back, Callahan looked for the waiter. The man was coming through the crowd. At this moment, Stanger arose. "Shawn, come along." Emotion darkened his lean face.

"I haven't had my drink."

"I'll buy you one at the bar, damn it!" Stanger said.

The barman was there, then, setting down glasses, and Callahan was taking something from his hip pocket, a folded packet of engraved pages.

Braga's face was rough with headlong fury. "Put those away!" he snapped.

Callahan took one of the papers from the packet and handed the rest to the waiter. "Ten dollars if you'll pin those up behind the bar," he said. "And put a notice under them: 'For Sale—Bonds in Texas and Arkansas Railroad. Sold at $50. Special this week, 50¢ That's

about the going rate," he explained.

Braga put one hand on the table and one on the arm of his chair. "Give them here, mister," he said quietly.

Shawn took the bond certificate from Craig's hand. "Pretty," she said. "What are they?"

"Bonds," he said. "Bonds that went to build Marsh Hoagland's last road, the T. & A. I helped build it, God help me, and so did Tom Braga. And now neither of us can enter the state of Texas again without being locked up. And tomorrow I'll tell Reserve about it."

Braga stood over him, a muscular, hard-eyed man with his fists balled. "You'll tell them it's a lie," he said. "A damned, jealous lie, because you weren't cut in on this job. I could have tromped you that night, Callahan. Once or twice I've been sorry I didn't."

"You aren't going to tromp me, though, Tom," Callahan said, "and you don't build another scrap-iron railroad."

It was not apparent that he had moved. But Braga swore and doubled at the belt. Craig had smashed his heel down on the construction man's instep. He came up, then, while Braga was recovering, his fist rising under the man's face and smashing into his mouth. Braga stumbled back, caught himself on a chair, and hesitated just long enough to wipe his bleeding mouth. Then his hand snapped down and he slammed the chair aside and lunged back.

3

Boothill Deals

CALLAHAN waited, dark-skinned, a sliver of smile showing between his lips. The saloonkeeper was coming from somewhere. "Now, boys!" he shouted. Braga was in with a smashing swing at Craig's jaw, the breath whistling through his teeth. Swerving away, Callahan felt the edge of the blow against his ear. Braga went by and Callahan pivoted to catch him. He missed with an overhand right and stepped into the man with a left. The blow thumped against Braga's chest.

Braga coughed and spat blood in Craig's face. Suddenly his knee rose toward Craig's crotch. As Craig ducked, he clamped a hammer-lock about the taller man's neck and brought his head down. Locking it against his ribs, he commenced smashing his left fist against the back of Callahan's neck. Hurt, Craig fought in blind shock. He was hammering at the railroad man's kidneys; he could feel the tough back-muscles under his fist. Braga was a chunk of gristle, as hard to grapple as a stump. The man was a competitor, a fighter all the way through.

Callahan suddenly plowed forward and they came up against the piano. Sawdust slid beneath their bootsoles. They were going down. Something cold drenched his face. He felt the cold skin of a schooner against his neck. As Braga's grip loosened, he yanked away. Braga was on his back with his head on the pedals, swearing, and Callahan came to his knees and struck at the bloody, furious face. He saw a cut open in a crisp blond eyebrow. Braga tried to roll. Callahan sat on his legs and slashed again at the cut. It gaped, and blood puddled about Braga's eye. Braga had the beer-schooner, suddenly. Craig seized his wrist to keep him from cocking for a blow.

They rolled away from each other as the schooner fell. Crouching, then, Callahan watched the man lurch up. He rose almost from Braga's feet, slashing at his eye again. Braga's head rolled. He pulled a chair to him; abruptly it went up over his head, his short arms bent. Callahan

backed away. He heard the crowd bawling at them. He heard a girl laughing hysterically and wondered whether it was Shawn. Then he felt the bar at his back. Braga was still coming on. Callahan's right hand went out along the bar, hunting something to throw; he dared not take his eyes off the railroad man. His fingers encountered the icy side of a cut-glass bowl. They fumbled up the side and closed on the edge. Something smooth, round and cold brushed his fingers; suddenly he had a desire to laugh. He pulled the bowl to him as Braga moved in and seized a handful of hard-boiled eggs, the best hard-boiled eggs in town, Roy Gentry had said.

Braga ducked as the first eggs flew. They struck the mirrored wheel with small crunching sounds. The second salvo missed him and hit the piano. A man began to roar with laughter. The third hit Tom Braga in the face. He was half-blind with particles of smashed yolk. He suddenly drove forward, and Callahan threw the bowl. It hit Braga's head just as he swung the chair. Callahan slid from under it and came at the railroad man from the side as the chair crashed against the mahogany.

Braga wheeled, his eyes slow and puzzled. At his hair-line there was a deep and ghastly cut the width of a man's hand, just commencing to bleed. Abruptly his knees loosened, but he recovered with two staggering steps and veered into Craig with a violent side-arm swing. Callahan drew his right arm and the massed power of his back and shoulder drove his fist levelly into Braga's jaw. Braga's eyes closed. His head was turned by the thrust of Callahan's fist. He stumbled sidewards. As he toppled, a man tried to support him, but he fell heavily in the sawdust.

After a moment Callahan's shoulders sagged. He shook his head and turned to the bar. The saloonkeeper stood there, impotently gripping a side-hammer shotgun. "Somebody's going to pay for this, or live on jail grub for a month."

"I call on Shawn to witness that he swung first," said Craig. "Charge it to the railroad crowd. But don't let them pay off in bonds."

HE STARTED down the bar, vaguely aware of the men silently watching him. He let his hand touch the back of each chair he passed, steadyingly. Someone was beside him.

"You can't go anywhere like that, Craig," Shawn Miller said. "You come with me. My room is upstairs." Slipping her arm through his, she piloted him to the front. On the street, the mist was colder, lowering and wet over the heavy street traffic. They started around the building to the sheet-metal outside stairway. A man and woman came out of the musty fog. It was a moment before Callahan realized it was Kathleen Winans and Roy Gentry. Gentry was carrying the girl's bags and saying,

"Got a promise on this suite as soon as somebody checked out tonight. You might have to wait a few minutes . . ."

They saw Callahan, then. He was bloody. He could feel the slow worming of a stream of blood from his nose. He weaved a little. Impatiently, Shawn gave his arm a shake.

"What's wrong, Craig? Can't you make it?"

Mrs. Winans' eyes opened widely. She winced at the blood on him. She stared at the saloon girl, in her short, flounced green dress. Then her glance dropped and she took Gentry's arm hastily. "I think we should hurry."

"Oh, they wouldn't dast—" At this point Gentry saw Callahan. "Craig, what the jasus—!"

"You were right," said Callahan. "This was a railroad town. But we've started making it over."

Shawn's room was a cell-like chamber at the end of a dim hall. She made him sit on a chair while she cleaned his cuts and tore up strips of cloth. The walls were covered with a dismal brown paper. Overhead, a carbide light fizzed. There was a display of rigid ambrotypes on a dresser. Callahan saw a gray military hat, the brim up on one side, hanging from a poster of the brass bedstead.

She saw him regarding it. Petulantly, she snatched it from the bed and threw it in the hall. "A man who would take that!"

She gave him a drink. Afterward, he got up. His head was musty with unassorted thoughts. How Kitty had looked . . . the feel of his fist on Braga's jaw— "Thanks, Shawn," he said. "I'll buy you a drink sometime."

"You'll buy me a lot of drinks," she told him, smiling.

Callahan shook his head. "I said I only needed a steady for tonight. If I needed one, though, I'd know where to find her."

Later, then, lying in his own room, he thought: This could get complicated, mister. Let's watch the angles from here on.

SOMETIME during the evening, a letter had been dropped in the slot of the stage company door. In the morning, it was lying there in a box with a few other pieces of mail.

"Mr. Hollis Lamerick would appreciate a conference with Mr. Craig Callahan at eleven o'clock at the San Juan County Bank."

He had expected something like this, and at eleven o'clock, shaven, his face cuts adjusted by a barber, he entered the bank. Next door, he saw the main office of the Far-Western Railroad Company. Unaware that space was all they had plenty of, Colorado people, he had noticed, had a tendency to build their structures high and narrow. This one was like a high-ceilinged hall. It was covered with pseudo-mahogany paper and carpeted with linoleum, pitted by the hobnails of miners and freighters. There were dust scales back of a spindly railing. A vault yawned, and before it was a desk inhabited by a stout man in a brown suit. A thin, ascetic-looking man sat with him. Both were smoking cigars, and appeared gloomy. A clerk took Callahan inside the railing.

"Mr. Sizemore, our manager," he introduced the stout man. "And Mr. Lamerick."

Callahan accepted a cigar. "Excuse the scars, gentlemen. I was brawling last night."

Lamerick cleared his throat with a bleating sound. He looked to Callahan like a pale and elderly Indian. His nose was lean and his eyes were cavernous and piercing. There was not a hint of humor in him.

"Is that the only way you know to adjust a difference, Callahan?" he asked.

"No. They use a gun, in Texas."

"They use a gun in Colorado, too, when it comes to it," Sizemore, the banker, said. "When the people of Reserve know what you're trying to do, it may come to it very quickly."

"What *am* I trying to do?" Callahan asked.

"Break the town, along with Far-Western Railroad Company. Reserve is saturated with railroad bonds. The bank alone holds a hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth. Every waitress and stablehand has bought."

"Is that my worry?"

Sizemore's eyes were a muddy-brown. He turned the fuming cigar in his fingers. "Only if you try to halt construction. I suppose Gentry told you I hold an overdue note of his?"

Callahan grunted. "Threats. I thought you had an offer to make me."

Lamerick said bitterly, "I thought you

might be a bonafide staging man. Go ahead with your plan to buy in with Gentry, if an offer is what you want. We'll take the stock off your hands later."

"If I get the stock, there won't be enough money in Reserve to buy it away from me. How did he sucker you men into this? You've tied up with a man who's been blackballed from the railroad trade. He can't go back to Texas, where he built a road two years ago. Neither can I, because I was his assistant enginner. The road fell apart. And so will this one."

Lamerick smiled. "In mining towns," he said, "you hear a lot of wild stories. This is one of the best I've heard."

Callahan pulled a T. & A. bond certificate from his pocket and laid it on the desk. "Wire the capitol about this. There's Hoagland's picture in the corner. I didn't quite make the grade, myself. Thank God for that!"

The men looked at it. The edge of a doubt showed for an instant in Lamerick's puckered blue eyes. Then he snorted. "I didn't quit banking to be badgered into bankruptcy by a medicine-show financier. I think that's all we have to say to each other."

The phrase had a familiar ring; it was like a known voice distantly heard. And then through all the stiffness of bearing, Callahan saw something in Hollis Lamerick, and he chuckled.

"All right, Lamerick. But let's not talk about medicine show tactics. One that I've been watching is about to break, too. I think we'll have something to say to each other, after that."

THERE was a small office behind the waiting room of the stage station. At a pyre of coals on a tiny hearth, Kathleen Winans knelt to warm her fingers. Callahan sat in a chair propped against the wall.

Gentry had sent for Mrs. Winans, at the hotel, and caught Craig after lunch. "No use fussin' around. You've seen the road and equipment. The books are here. I operate four coaches, figger fifteen hundred apiece. Figger hosses at a hundred each; that's seventy-six hundred. Figger miscellaneous equipment at another two thousand. Come to around thirteen thousand, not includin' good will. Knock it down to ten for depreciation."

"Clear?" asked Callahan.

"You didn't think I'd sell stock if it was, did you? I've lost money on the mail contract the last three years."

Kitty kept her face turned to the fire. "How much for fifty-one percent?"

"A million dollars. For forty-nine percent, three thousand. That would clear me."

"I'll give you thirty-two," said Callahan.

"Thirty-five!" Kathleen said sharply. She stood, her hands clenched.

"Thirty-six."

Gentry scratched his neck. "Let's have one thing clear: Stock will be non-transferable. I'll have no railroad scum for a pardner."

Callahan's ears warmed; but Gentry was regarding Kitty Winans. "I've heard that Callahan—begging his pardon—used to work for Tom Braga and Marsh Hoagland. I heard that he knocked the tar out of Braga last night. Does that mean," he asked, "that you're shut of railroading?"

"A straight answer for a straight question: No. But it means I'll make you a rich man when I ram this stageline down their throats."

Gentry's mouth hardened. "I wouldn't have the Union Pacific railroad itself as a present."

Craig locked his hands behind his back. "I'll gamble I can talk you into selling to them, when the time comes. If I can't, it's my loss, not yours. On the other hand, you'd have trouble getting that

money anywhere else. I heard a note of yours was about to be called by Sizemore."

"Of course, there's still Mrs. Winans," Gentry observed. "You ain't saying much, Kitty. I've kind of been thinking of you as my pardner."

Callahan saw how pale she had gone. Her face was set. "I—I hoped it could be that way."

"Because I know I can count on you," Gentry said. "I know your background, and I figure staging is a better place to be from than railroading."

Kitty Winans' eyes suddenly filled. "Stop it!" she said. She took a step toward him, and then snatched her cape from a wall-hook. "I've just remembered something. I—I can't do it."

Callahan moved to lean back against the door, smiling as he blocked her escape. "You just remembered your name was Lamerick, didn't you?"

The cape fell from Kitty's fingers. Her eyes were wide. Callahan stopped to retrieve the cape. When he straightened, she had walked to Gentry.

"You knew, too, didn't you?"

Gentry smiled. "I'd hate to say that you looked like an old goat like Hollis Lamerick, but there *is* something."

She turned back. At the door, she faced them. "But this much is the truth: I made them promise you'd make money out of it. They said you'd be paid well, in money and stock. And of course the stage line *can't* last long, Mr. Gentry."

"That's where we disagree," Gentry said quietly.

She opened the door. "I'm sorry. For everything. And I'd like to say something to you, too, Mr. Callahan—something you said to me. I don't think your friends are the best in the world, either."

Callahan said gravely, "I'd pick better, Kitty, if I had any encouragement."

She turned and walked briskly from the room.

"Nice young woman," Gentry sighed. "But I knew from the first she was no stagin' woman. Why, hell, she called the tugs 'thorough-braces' once! Well," he said, "if you want to throw money around thataway, let's walk up to the bank."

4

Tooth and Nail

AFTERWARD, they signed papers at a lawyer's office, and shook hands on the boardwalk. The chill of early evening stung the thronged street. A jackass train jingled past and a couple of gopher-hole miners rode by on mules.

Gentry looked at his watch. "By damn! That stage is due."

"Go on down," Callahan said. "I'm going to drop in on Judge Lightfoot. I sounded him on your chances to make that franchise stick when I was up here before. He promised me a cease and desist when I ask for it. I'm asking for it now."

Gentry hesitated. "Good luck. Understand one thing, Craig. Anytime you want to see fireworks, you furnish your own matches. I figure I can lick them without making a fuss. If you want to stand up and beller—go ahead."

After a moment Craig said, "Suppose there's trouble. Whose side will you be on?"

Gentry's eyes hardened. "I'm on the side of the Colorado Stage Company. Let them touch one of my stagecoaches, or one of my drivers, and they've got a scrap on. Being that you ain't a coach or a driver, Callahan, you're on your own."

He turned and strode down the walk toward the depot. Callahan watched his

suspendered back disappear into the crowd. Then he ascended the steep, curving street to the county courthouse.

In his shadowy chambers behind the courtroom, Judge Cady Lightfoot seated Callahan and swung an extension-lamp over his desk. A bearded man of fifty, he was stout as a bull and roared everything he said. "Hearing things about you, Callahan!" he declared. "Whipped Tom Braga, did you?"

"I always said I could," said Callahan.

Lightfoot grabbed in a desk drawer. "From what I gather, you won't have to do it again. They took him out to the railroad camp in a wagon. Here we are. Reckoned you'd be back, so I drawed it up."

He adjusted pince-nez spectacles, turned up the lamp-flame, and read the instrument aloud. He affixed his name, vised his official seal onto the document and handed it to Callahan.

"And that," he said, "was the start of the damndest fight you ever saw! It'll take more than paper and ink to block Far-Western."

"You don't think I can scare them, eh?"

"I don't think anybody can scare Marsh Hoagland. He was in here once threatening to have me impeached if I ever signed such a document as that-there. I said I'd have him arrested for attempted intimidation. He laughed in my face."

Callahan went to the door but Lightfoot spoke again. "Got it in for railroads, have you?"

"Just this one."

"That's too bad," sighed the judge. "I happen to hold ten thousand dollars worth of their bonds. It was my duty to sign that paper, but it's my own business if I hope they knock the tar out of you. Good-night."

The mountain darkness had fallen like a blanket. Callahan lingered to light a cigar before starting down the street. He was abreast of the alley between the courthouse and a carriage factory when a man spoke beside him.

"Why don't you just serve it here?"

CALLAHAN halted. He did not turn immediately; it might be the man held a gun, and it was possible he was nervous. Then he recorded the voice. "I could do that, Marsh," he said.

Hoagland stood there with another man, who was lean and dark and wore a cavalryman's hat. It was Captain Elmo Stanger. Hoagland wore a heavy corduroy coat and a flat Stetson. His face was blocked out in shadow. A gun glinted darkly in his hand.

"Walk down the alley," Hoagland said. "Ahead of us."

"Maybe I should scream," Callahan suggested.

"Maybe you should try."

Reaching the far end, they were on a quiet back street behind the business section. A man on each side of him, they started down the hill. "When do I get to serve the paper?" Callahan asked. His eyes flicked ahead of them.

"This is it," Stanger said. The cavalryman opened a rear door. Preceding them, Stanger lighted a lamp. Shades were drawn in the front office. It was a large, bare room with maps on the wall, mapcases forming a partition between front and rear portions, and several desks on an oiled wood floor. This was the office of the railroad company. Hoagland now took Callahan's .45 and patted his clothing for the belly-gun he had used before.

Craig stared at the cavalryman. "Where do you come into this, General?"

"I come into this in keeping the peace. You've set out to disrupt everything in sight. It goes beyond town jurisdiction. It becomes mine, when you tamper in territorial matters."

"Or romantic?"

Hoagland pulled a chair around and sat near Callahan, drawing a billfold from his coat. "That was a hell of a licking you gave Tom Braga," he remarked. "You always said you could."

"If you're superstitious, you should be sweating. I said I could lick you, too."

"I'm not," said Hoagland. "Tom wanted to come back and kill you. I told him not to be a damned fool. You'd had your fun, and you'd be ready to clear out, now, and it would look like you were afraid of him coming back at you. So he could still strut."

"I haven't had all my fun, though."

"You've had the part that's going to be fun." Hoagland handed him the same bond certificate he had given Hollis Lamerick that morning. "My partner handed me this when I came in tonight. Got any more of them?"

"A trunkful."

"That's what I figured. How much do you want for them?"

"A job. In charge of construction for Far-Western."

Hoagland's face acquired a look of dry anger, a crowding impatience. "You'll sit there with a gun on you and talk like the same damned fool you always were! The Robin Hood of railroading. Get it into your head that I'm building this road! That you've had your party and now you're going to clean up the mess."

He threw the certificate at a waste-basket. From the billfold, he tugged a draft. He snapped it taut with his fingers. "Five thousand dollars," he said. "That gives you a profit. I got it that you paid thirty-six hundred. That'll buy your way out."

"What good would forty-nine percent do you?"

"A lot. Even a forty-nine percent partner can do a lot of ordering of things the company don't need. He can drag his feet till the whole outfit comes to a stop. Don't think a franchise is concrete, either mister. It can be broken. But understand this: You've shot off your mouth around here for the last time. You got Lamerick riled up. He was preaching to me like a Sunday school superintendent. What had I done, and what was all this about being banned in Texas? I'll take no more of it, from you or from anybody. I warned you to keep out of it."

HE WADDED the check and threw it to Callahan, who caught it. Hoagland said, "Stanger will take you to the county line."

Callahan looked over the whiplike cavalryman, noting the bottled anger in his face. "Does he guarantee safe-conduct?"

"That's between you and him," said Hoagland.

"You don't go about things like a man who cared what happened to him, anyway," Stanger said. "I might have killed you the other night."

"Why didn't you?"

"How would it look—an officer squabbling in a saloon?"

"It would have looked better than crawfishing."

Callahan put the balled check on the lamp chimney, where it browned and caught fire, sending a tall column of flame upward. "You didn't try," he said, "because you're yellow. And Hoagland comes around after dark because he's yellow. And I'll be damned if I can't lick both of you!"

They were moving in, Stanger's gun still watching him, but Craig's palm smashed the cut-glass reservoir of the lamp and it arched toward the cavalryman. He ducked and slashed at the lamp, holding his fire. Landing, it crashed into blackness.

Hoagland was lunging at him through the darkness. Callahan ducked out of the chair. He struck a map-case with his shoulder and it began to topple. Some-

thing mashed his ear painfully. He heard the case strike the floor. He was down and rolling over and coming up, and a dark shape was over him and slashing at his head. He sank down, pressing his palms against the sides of his head.

Even then, instinct drove him away again. Captain Stanger was feinting in; in the darkness, diluted by a street light, he groped after Callahan with one hand, his other raised. Craig fired a blow at his groin. He heard him cry out. He charged after him with both hands, crawling over broken glass as he went. Stanger fell under him.

A clap of sound shook the room. For an instant they were all included in a bloody sphere of light. Hoagland was groping about, bent at the waist, a revolver palmed in his right hand, as a club. Stanger's face was waxy—his lips were pulled back from his teeth, his eyes stared crazily as Callahan's fingers hunted the Colt he had fired.

The instant died. Hoagland was rushing in. As Callahan began to twist at the gun, the railroad boss smashed at his head. It was a staggering thing which lasted only a moment. It was pain drenching him darkly, and flowing away, and then a vast ocean of ease.

YOU could die like this, he thought, and nobody would know or give a damn. You could regain your senses with blood glueing your head to the floor, with your skull expanding and contracting like a concertina—you could crawl to the door and lie there making sounds when someone walked past, but you might as well be on the prairie. You were alone.

But he was alive. That was surprising. It was only that no one liked to do murder; murder was the most inefficient system of disposal in the world. You could whip a man out of town and no one would care. But if you killed him, someone, sometime, would want to know about it.

Heels tapped past the door again and he rolled onto his side and tried to reach the door to strike at it. His knuckles missed by inches. But the footfalls turned in. A key rasped in a padlock and the door swung in and bumped his shoulder. He moaned.

Kitty Winans uttered a short and startled scream. She retreated. He could see her bell-like silhouette against the light of the street. A turn-out ground past, but did not stop.

Callahan mumbled: "Kitty . . ."

"Craig," Kitty said; her voice was low, accusing, and tragic.

In the lamplight she helped him sit up. She bustled, with constant exclamations. "I never, never, *never* saw a man who— No! Sit there."

Suddenly it dawned on her. She stood, her mouth open, staring at him as he tried to keep his chin from touching his chest. "You were robbing the office? Someone must have—"

He waved a hand. "Get me a drink."

She found something. He let the brandy feather the edge from his nerves and moved to a chair.

"The more I see of your friends," he said, "the less I think of them. When I get Stanger alone—"

"Stanger? He's your friend, not mine. Or his girl is, from what I was able to gather last night."

"She was just taking me to her room to fix me up."

"And tonight I'm the lucky girl."

"Kitty," he said, "do you want to know what happened?"

"Do you want to tell me?"

"Hoagland and Stanger licked me. The two of them."

Her features firmed. "Mr. Hoagland isn't that kind."

"When the time comes," Craig said, "he'll have someone hold your father's arms behind him, and he'll beat him until he agrees to whatever Hoagland wants.

That's what they did to me in Texas."

Kitty turned away and stood at the door, staring out. "I don't believe it, Craig. I don't think my father is so poor a judge of men as that."

"I didn't think I was, either."

He drank more of the brandy. He could feel drying blood crack on his neck when he tilted his head. "Do me a favor. Go get Gentry. He'll get me home."

"All right. Craig," she said, turning to him, "was that bond certificate legitimate? Is that really Mr. Hoagland's picture on it?"

"If I told you he licked me because I wouldn't turn the rest of them over to him, you wouldn't believe me. So let's say it was George Washington."

"You've upset Father," she confessed. "He wired Texas. But we know what the answer will be. You're bluffing."

"I'm a poor bluffer. Only women bluff well."

She stood close to him, shaking her head. "As long as you live, you'll think of me as a liar and a cheat."

Callahan shook his head. "As long as I live, Kitty, I'll wonder why we had to meet this way. On opposite sides of the fence."

CALLAHAN slept, aided by liquor. He awoke to a warm morning. He could see horses tugging at heaps of hay in the corral. A workman was filing a horse's hoof, its foreleg gripped between his knees. But the usual morning sight of Gentry washing down a stagecoach was absent. Callahan had an outsize headache. He attempted to get out of bed, but had to give up.

He slept again, and afterward Gentry came with a steaming cup of coffee. He sat making sounds with his plates while Callahan told him about his session with Hoagland and Captain Stanger.

"Stanger took off this morning for end-o'-track with fifteen troopers," Gentry growled. "That's practically his whole command. Ain't seen Hoagland. I tried to get Stanger to check on that coach. Last night's mail didn't come in. I could be sore at you, Callahan," he said. "Things were going all right. At least they left me alone."

"They wouldn't raid a mail-coach!" Callahan exclaimed. "Hell, that's Federal property."

"Maybe Piutes raided it. Maybe Hoagland bought them the whiskey and pointed out where to knock it over. I'll give it till tonight," he said. "Then I'm going out. No freight's come in, either. I don't savvy it."

Callahan lay staring at the ceiling. "That's only eighteen hours. Might be a washout."

"Been no storm," said Gentry. "I'll leave you in charge of the office if I go. Can you handle it without getting in a gunfight?"

Through that day Callahan rested. He heard men in front demanding mail. Once a man said:

"Wait'll that train's a-runnin', you old mossback! We'll have daily service, and on time, by God!"

There was a side door to his room, which opened onto the yard. Near sundown the porcelain knob turned, and Callahan saw the door slowly slant in. He was lying on his side at the time, a cigar in his mouth. In an instant he had his Colt in his hand. He watched stiffly while the door swung into the room.

A girl's face showed in the dusk. Suddenly she saw the gun. "Craig!"

It was Shawn Miller. Callahan shoved the gun back under his pillow.

She sat on the edge of the bed, wincing as she looked at him. "I didn't think he was man enough to do it. He told me this morning he'd whipped you. I thought he was lying. But I had to see."

"Stanger? He's *mucho hombre,*" said Craig. "With somebody holding my arms."

Her eyes held a dark shine. "Was it that way?"

"That's the way I remember it."

"If I were a man," she breathed, "and anyone did that to me—!"

"Do you want me to give it back to him?" He watched her, amused.

"He's a coward," Shawn said tightly, "and a bully, and it's a bad combination. And it's become a killing game."

"What do you mean?"

"If you want to hear news first, you should move your office to a saloon. A freighter came in afoot fifteen minutes ago. There was a slide on Cougar Mountain grade. Bill Fox's stage was wrecked. They'd dug the team out when this man started in. The passengers and mail are at Long Valley station. No one killed," she said, "but it certainly wasn't for not trying."

Callahan gazed out the window. "That's a steep grade. It could have been a slide."

"It would be the first in six years. Do you think it would happen at the very moment the coach ran under an overhang? It was luck that no one was killed. But it won't be luck if the coaches don't run for a month."

It came back to Callahan. Hoagland's rough threat—*Franchises aren't concrete . . . they can be broken.* A two-week holdup of mail and passengers would jeopardize the franchise. In post-office circles, slides were not considered a valid excuse.

Callahan moved about. He buckled on his gun belt. He poured water into the thick china basin. Shawn's hands took his shoulders and turned him.

"You could thank me," she said.

Callahan said soberly, "I'm obliged. But you'd be better off to let me find things out for myself. Stanger will know about it."

"I'd take the risk, Craig, if I thought it were worth it."

She was a tender-lipped, provocative girl, obscurely exciting; and all Callahan could think of was Kitty Winan.

He stood at the mirror and ran a brush through his hair. He thought a moment before he told her:

"It isn't, Shawn. It was over before it started."

When he looked around, she was at the door. "I can't say you didn't warn me, can I?" she said. "But don't look for any more favors from me, Craig, because even flounces don't make a girl *that* much of a fool!"

5

Dynamiters

CALLAHAN found Gentry in a shed assembling picks, axes and shovels. In a black mood, Gentry said, "Man gets in the clear, and the next day a thousand dollars worth of rocks falls on him!"

"Going out tonight?"

"Not in Injun weather. I'll scrape up a road gang and we'll take off in the morning."

In the morning, workmen began to assemble in the stage yard to load pack-mules and crawl onto wagons. A sharp pleasure filled Callahan as he saddled his horse. He had been too long from the atmosphere of roadmaking—of heavy tools and hard-working men, and he looked forward to showing Gentry how fast a road could be made out of an avalanche.

The train strung out down the quiet dawn street of Reserve. A pack-train was just making up at the loading dock of a mountain freight outfit.

Four hours out, they broke for the nooning at the foot of Cougar Mountain grade. Making the summit in a bare stand of lodge-pole, the road tipped down. The

mountainside was steep, climbing by rims to blunt peaks still marbled with snow. A long, curving valley lay along the base of the mountains. Gentry pointed to the station, brown log boxes on the new-green of the spring grass. About a half-mile from here, they came upon the slide. It buried the road for a hundred yards, a flood of huge gray boulders, earth, and trees.

Leaving their ponies, they climbed across it. They found the dead team at the lower fringe of the slide. The coach had been removed, apparently still capable of being rolled, but the horses had been dropped and half-buried by the stones.

Gentry stood looking back up the slide. "How long?"

"Two weeks," Callahan decided.

"Then the mail's got to go around the other side, by pack train. Two weeks, without snow to alibi me, would break my

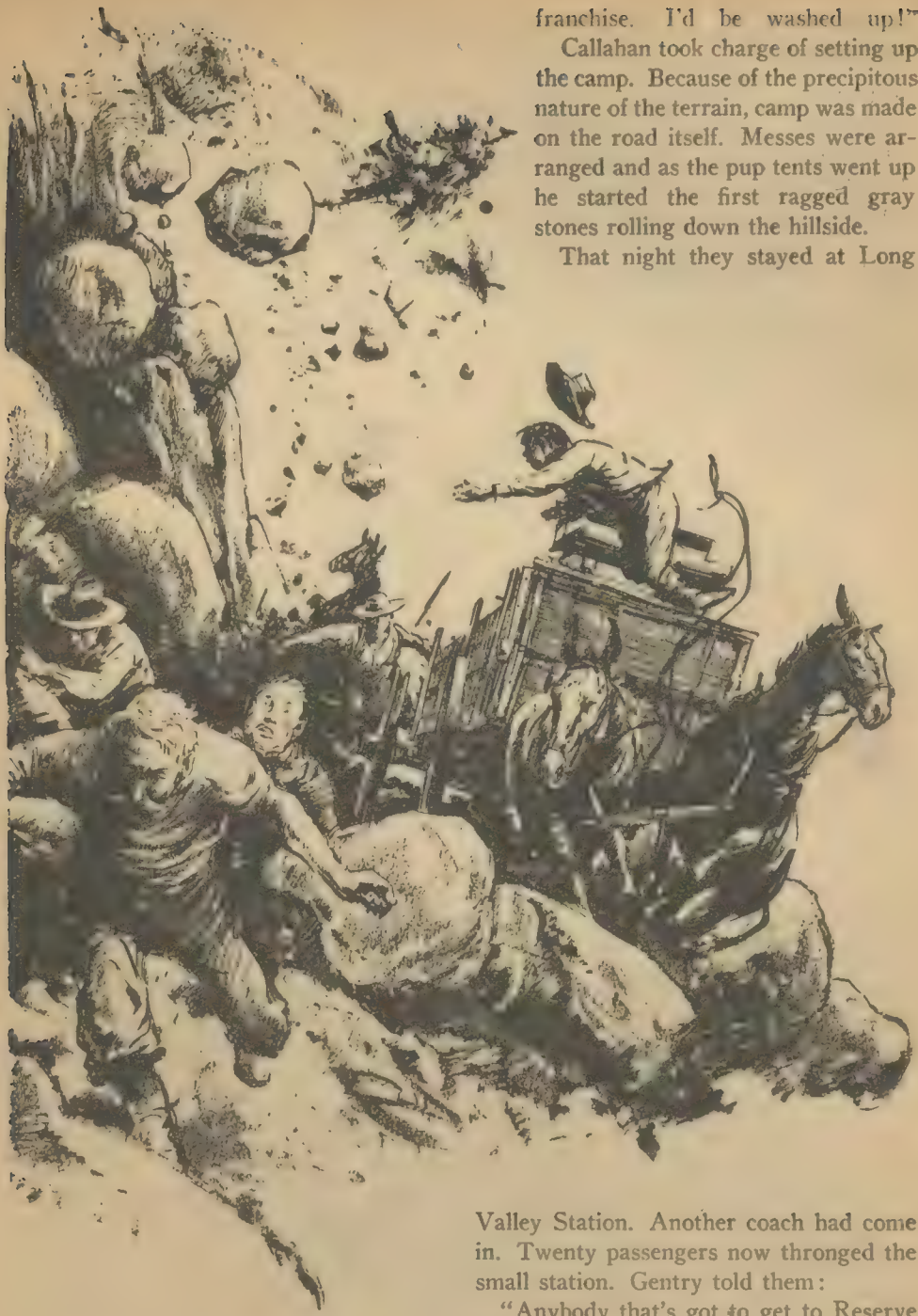
Her hands clutched him as he ran on

franchise. I'd be washed up!"

Callahan took charge of setting up the camp. Because of the precipitous nature of the terrain, camp was made on the road itself. Messes were arranged and as the pup tents went up he started the first ragged gray stones rolling down the hillside.

That night they stayed at Long Valley Station. Another coach had come in. Twenty passengers now thronged the small station. Gentry told them:

"Anybody that's got to get to Reserve can go with the mail train. The rest will be better off to go back to Bitter Creek by stage tomorrow. We'll have things running again in two weeks."



A skinner deserted his team and in panic dived over the edge

A man said sourly, "And I passed up a chance to drum shoes in New York state, where they've got railroads!"

"Brother," Gentry snapped, "there's a power of folks came to Colorado just because there *ain't* any railroads!"

BY THE following night, the log-jam of derelict passengers was broken. By mule, a few went on to Reserve. By coach, the remainder returned to Bitter Creek. But on the meadow behind the station, freight trains began to pile up, dusty wagons hauling two or three trailers and pulled by five and six span of mules. Food, liquor and supplies for Reserve and the score of mountain communities it served began to mass like logs in a mill pond. Grain sacks ran empty and teams scoured on the washy spring grass. Teamsters broke into their loads for provisions.

A wagonmaster came to Gentry one morning with whiskey on his breath and sourness in his eyes.

"It's roads like yours," he declared, "that will be the death of freighting and staging. I've got three ton of vegetables from California, set down by U. P. at Biter Creek. Better'n a thousand miles without spoilage. And now, by God, they set here under the sun and rot on a hundred-and-ten-mile haul!"

Gentry said, "Avalanches can happen to railroads, too. They can even happen to freighters that get too free with their advice."

Callahan left him alone those ten days of blasting and muscling at the slide. The old man was seeing the first tinge of death in the face of something he loved. He must know that a single slide after the railroad began competing—a single wagon-train of food spoiled—and he would be finished. His road would be forgotten by all but a few hapless passengers who failed to make the train. . . .

Gentry let the coaches roll again. A threadlike passage was driven through the granite. Two stages made it in, and one morning Hollis Lamerick and Kitty dismounted at the camp from the first stage from Reserve. Callahan, working near the upper margin of the slide, went to meet them.

Lamerick held an envelope in his hand and struck it against his leg. "Well, you were right. The governor of Texas had the goodness to wire me that he'd pay fifty dollars for my partner's scalp, untanned; a hundred tanned. He says you're on the list, too."

"And trying hard to get off." Callahan, dusty and sunburned, looked at Kitty. "If that's an apology in your eyes, forget it. I was taken too, once."

The sun sparkled in the earrings she wore, and made her shade her eyes with her hand; her eyes were grave, and there was not the remnant of a smile on her mouth.

"You were right," she told him. "Hoagland *is* that kind—the kind to hold someone's arms while someone else gives the beating. And we were the ones he picked to do the beating. It was the bondholders he let us beat, and we thought we were doing them a service."

Lamerick growled, "Kathleen, you're getting ahead of things. We don't *know* that he isn't building a substantial railroad this time. It's possible he's realized there was more money in hauling freight and passengers than in what he did in Texas."

Callahan smiled. "That was the best business in the world. Half of every bond we sold he sent away, banked it out-of-state. He sold his railroad land as fast as he could claim it. He must have put away a hundred thousand. And I'll cover all bets that he hasn't sunk more than ten thousand in this road."

Lamerick's face resisted it. "I've looked at the road, myself. I see no difference between our road and the U. P., except

that we're narrow-gage. No difference."

"And a Piute," said Callahan, "wouldn't see much difference between a bottle of vinegar and a bottle of whiskey, until he'd tried them. Lamerick, this road isn't ballasted, it's dusted with gravel! It doesn't bridge, it toe-dances on two-by-fours! I could bend the rails with my hands, and the ties—they're doing their seasoning right in the ground. They'll start shrinking before long and you'll have seven different gages of track. I went over every yard of it, afoot, before I jumped into this. I know what he's doing. And I know how to lick him."

"When you say, 'lick him,' " Lamerick drily pointed out, "you're saying, 'lick Reserve.' Including myself, and Sizemore, and Judge Lightfoot, and a few hundred investors. The noose is big, Callahan. You can't hang him without hanging us."

A jay swooped past; a muleskinner whacked his team along with a rock-sled combing dust behind. The stage team minced into the narrow cut through the slide.

Lamerick raised a hand to the driver. "Kathleen, go along to the station. We'll go back on the evening stage."

She shook her head, smiling. "Not until I hear what *this* railroader is selling."

THEY walked up the road, out of the dust and litter of the camp. Through the steeple tops of the pines, five miles east, Callahan could see a white feather of dust where a railroad grading crew was blasting. The sound came moments later, like a faint rumble of mountain thunder.

"If it weren't for you and the rest," Callahan said, "I'd be over there on the railroad with a hired crew of roughnecks, tearing up track. I could do it, legally. I've got the cease and desist, and I guess you could say I served it the other night. I'd make guerrilla warfare, if I had to. Every time he went forward by one bridge, I'd burn another. But I wanted to work out something that would take care of everybody. Getting down to cases," he said, "how much of the voting stock do you hold?"

"A third. I put up two-thirds of the cash to start, he put up a third and the location stakes."

"With enough proxies, you could outvote him, couldn't you?"

"If you're talking about a vote to discontinue the project, I don't expect to find many men willing to give me their proxies."

"I'm talking about reorganizing. Vote yourself chief of construction, with me as your assistant. And take care of Roy Gentry by giving him a few hundred shares for his franchise. Then we'll see about building a railroad."

"And yet," Lamerick frowned, "I have the feeling that Hoagland's still got a hole-card somewhere."

"Play yours, then," Callahan said impatiently. "I've shown you the way. If you want to string along with him until the investors begin talking about you and him in the same breath—"

"Craig's right," Kitty said. "If you don't fight him with votes now, you may have to fight with guns later."

There was a sharp, concussive powder-blast at a distance. Callahan glanced down the grade. He had not authorized a shot. But he did not see the dust, and a moment later as the echoes poured back from the hills he heard a patter of small stones. There was a frozen moment of standing there, listening and searching, and then Kitty's sharp question:

"Craig, are they blasting above us?"

He lokoed up the rough staircase of rimrock ledges mounting to the peaks. He had the curious sensation that something was out of plumb. A gray-green island of pines two hundred feet above seemed to be leaning toward them. Then he saw a giant block of granite separate

itself from a buttress, like a keystone, and go into a slow fall toward the road.

The moment shattered. He was sweeping Kitty up in his arms and lunging toward the slide. He heard his own voice bawling something. Down the road, workmen looked around, resting on their shovels. Then they, too, began to run deeper into the slide.

A fragment of a rim high above the road had torn loose. Powdersmoke drifted through the trees and boulders were bounding down the steep hillside in a tawny fog.

LAMERICK was there, trying to take Kitty from him. He shouted something in his face and swerved from him. There was a patter of small stones and then an impact that trembled in the earth. Bounding away, the boulder struck a mule tied to a tree and carried it overside. Ahead of Callahan, dust blossomed in small spurts from the road. A sharp pain struck his foot and he fell with the girl.

Callahan put her over his shoulder in a rude fireman's carry. Her hands clutched him as he ran on. Stones were landing in the old slide. A skinner deserted his team and in panic dived over the edge. Picks and shovels blocked the narrow cut.

Then, with a grinding roar, the main body of the blast struck the grade. It was a blunt, concussive sound, and then a grating rattle of tons of disturbed granite jarring across the roadbed. Another stone ricocheted into Callahan's back. Again he tripped, and this time he crawled against a boulder near the bank and crouched there above the girl.

After a long time the surf-like roaring ebbed; it was a dusty silence struck with the occasional crumpling descent of a single stone down the hill. Then it was over.

Callahan sat back. Up the grade, the old slide merged into a new one. Dust drifted over the rubble. Half-buried, a mule could be seen raising and lowering its head. A pine lay, roots-up, across the road.

Craig looked at Kitty. She was gray with dust, her bonnet hung by the ribbons and her dark hair had come loose.

He helped her up. "I've put it off too long," he said. "I'm going to do it."

"Do what?"

He framed her face with his hands and kissed her on the mouth. "What I've told myself I'd do sooner or later. It took a slide to make me realize some things can't wait. You get killed, and there you are—the most important things left undone."

She drew away, her expression arch. "I'm not sure this is the time and place to do it, however."

"Or that I'm the one to do it?"

"That remains to be seen, too," Kitty said. "You've got plenty of time before the next excitement, I hope."

"That's what I'm not sure of," Callahan sighed.

Lamerick's face was beginning to color. "What kind of gang are you running, Callahan? I thought you were the one who knew all about ramrodding a road-gang!"

Callahan pushed by him, heading for the horse-corral. Gentry was coming from somewhere, shirtless and roaring. "Who in the tarnal hell—!"

Callahan said, "No loss, Roy. Just a couple of mules and two weeks' work. You're a peaceable man, so I won't ask you along on this ride I'm taking."

Gentry, his chest working, stared upward. "It was a shot, wasn't it?"

The line of saddle-horses was restive. Callahan tightened cinches, and was about to mount when Gentry caught out his horse and swung up. "I'm a patient man," he said, "but I'm not yellow."

They were wheeling toward the camp when Hollis Lamerick strode in.

"There won't be a better time to reorganize this outfit than now," he said.

"Can you spare me a horse?"

NEAR Cougar Mountain summit, a trail split east, sloughing from the mountain into the rough foothills where the railroad was building. Lamerick turned his pony down this trail. As Callahan followed, Gentry shook his head.

"He'd be up on the rims."

"Not unless he's crazy. He'd have cut a half-hour fuse and taken off for wherever he'd come from . . . probably the railroad camp."

After a moment, Gentry grunted and came along.

They worked slowly eastward against a cool breeze off the mountains. The growth was scent, of tough mountain shrubs and grasses and patches of squaw-carpet. Hillsides fell off into canyons, canyons led them along streams still brown with the thaw, and then they would strike a switchbacking ascent to a ridge a little higher than the last. On one of these, with the wind cold and stiff in his face, Callahan studied the brown scar of the railroad coming across the apron of the Rockies and stalling against the hip of a mountain. Disapproval touched his face: There was no reason for a tunnel there. An easy swing westward, a trestle across a narrow canyon, and the road would have been three miles closer to Reserve by now.

His carbine rested across the fork of the saddle. Craig's fingers pressed around the loading lever in sudden reaction. There was movement on a hillside southeast of them. He spoke to Lamerick. "Better if you go in first. If we show up, there'll be trouble right off."

"I don't think Hoagland would be out here anyway. He was in town when I left."

"Go on," Callahan commanded shortly. "Lay it down to Braga and whoever's around. Fire everybody in sight, but let them know there'll be more work after the smoke clears to hell out of here."

After he was out of earshot, Callahan turned to Gentry. "See him?"

"Ten minutes ago. We're coming to a meeting with him, if he don't see us first."

A horse worked in and out of mottes of leafless aspen a mile away. To gain the railroad camp, the rider would have to swing around the toe of the same bony ridge through which the road was tunneling. Lamerick would pass ahead of the rider, having a lead on him, but his town-eyes would not be likely to discover him.

Callahan waited five minutes. Then he rode ahead.

From another lift of timber they watched Lamerick ride from a screen of pines into the clutter of the construction camp. Workmen drifted along the grade. There was no sign of the other horseman. Callahan's nerves began to vibrate. He brought a shell under the firing pin and let the pony take the downslope at a fast jog.

They came into a small wallow where a creek ran through greenish boulders. Above them, the stream fell whitely down a steep and narrow canyon, and it was from this canyon that the horseman must come to reach the camp.

They drifted to within a hundred yards of the sidetrail, hidden in gray serviceberry. Ten minutes passed. A hawk wheeled above them. There were sounds from the camp a half mile away—the ring of metal and the slow scrape of shovels. A supply train chuffed in.

Callahan's pony turned its head to gaze up-canyon. A moment later a roan horse, flecked with lather, pushed dispiritedly into view. The rider was a compact-looking man in a gray work-shirt. He held a browned carbine in his right hand, watching the trail closely as he rode. Welts striped the flank of the horse where a small-roweled spur had raked it. He could have been any railroad worker coming

in from hunting meat or locating stakes; but the horse carried saddlebags too large for ammunition and too small for transit and claim. They looked to Callahan about right for dynamite and fuse.

He raised the carbine; the horseman twisted suddenly in the saddle and saw him, and Callahan saw the man's gun swing and had a darting glimpse of a brown, flat face before the gun crashed.

EARTH exploded between him and Gentry. A slug screamed away. Callahan's horse went crazy. It began pitching toward the creek as he clubbed it over the head with his gun. He could hear Gentry yelling at his horse, and there was a hard rattle of gravel from the trail. He turned and saw the roan horse buck-jumping uphill into the trees. He fired a shot over the man's head and shouted at him.

Gentry had his horse under control. He shouted at Craig, "Cut him off from the camp! I'll take the trail . . ."

Slashing into the pines, Callahan took the hill, driving on a tangent between the trail and the camp. The pines were an island on the stony mountainside, which ascended steeply to timberline. A horseman could be flushed from cover in an hour's time. We've got him, he thought; but having a tiger in a sack did not amount to capture. The man in there did not know but what he was being sought for murder. He would not walk out with his hands up.

It was suddenly quiet. Callahan reined in. Sounds from the railroad camp had ceased, except for a few voices quizzically raised. Then there was a rattle of hoofs and he put the pony forward. The hoof-sounds halted. Callahan's hand brought the horse in sharply. Through the trees he could see what was beyond the growth: A long dike of granite lying across the slope like an arm. There would be no riding a horse across it to a higher trail. It would be south, to the trail; or north, to the camp, and capture.

Callahan left the horse and walked quietly through the pine needles. There was the fragrance of pitch and the sound of his own tight breathing. After a while he heard a horse moving, and he pressed against a tree and waited . . . The roan pony came into view; he had a sick instant of trying to keep himself from firing at it instead of the rider. But as it came forward through the service-berry, he saw that it was riderless: The reins had been tied to the horn.

Callahan began to run. He slanted through the trees toward open ground. He could hear a man moving: Branches cracked and once it seemed that he had fallen. Then it was silent again. Craig slowed. He was walking carefully down an aisle of cinnamon-barked pines when he heard footfalls, not in pine-needles but on stone.

He came out the back door of the trees and saw the man sliding into a deep groove in the granite: It appeared as though the stone had been sliced and the wedge removed like a center-slice of bread. A man could just squeeze himself in there like a wounded fox and wait . . .

The carbine slammed again. Callahan dropped. Sighting, he could not see the gunman. He backed into the trees and began to run. The slot was a transverse one; from farther south, it provided no shelter at all. He had a view of clothing and gunmetal. The rifle roared again and bark flew ten feet ahead of him. Callahan hit the ground.

Then he took his time. The man in the slot was perfectly visible. He himself was screened by brush. He reached a tree and made sure he had a shell in the chamber. He chanced a long look. The gunman was trying to climb. Where the fissure squeezed in, it was possible to scramble higher, making it to the next step of rimrock.

Callahan shouted, "Dead or alive, mister!"

The fugitive writhed and the carbine came to his shoulder; but Callahan's gun had driven its yellow flame out and the echoes of it slammed back with force that made him wince.

The gun rattled down the rocks. The man began to fall, but caught halfway down and hung there, head down. Callahan could see blood dripping from the tip of his nose. He slowly lowered the gun. He shook his head, as though he had been clipped on the chin. Then he got up and went back to his horse.

ONLY Tom Braga was at the camp. Several score workmen, some of them Chinese, some Irish immigrants, were distributing ballast while miners sledged star-drills in the tunnel. A weathered colony of tents sheltered the Chinese; a shabby camp train on a siding housed the white workers. On slender poles, a thread of new copper wire dipped northward toward Bitter Creek.

Hollis Lamerick was with Braga at the superintendent's yellow car, ahead of the clerical car and store. A cluster of office workers stood at the steps of the clerical car. Braga, short and surly, a long bandage across his forehead, stood by the tracks with his arms folded. His face was still puffy with bruises, but Callahan could look into the thorny eyes and think,

I licked everything out of him but the fight. Nobody will ever do that.

Lamerick looked at Callahan and Gentry. He and Braga had been arguing: Rancor was in both their faces.

Lamerick asked quickly: "What was the firing?"

"We dropped him. He wouldn't surrender. What was the pay, Tom?" he asked Braga. "Hunter's wages?"

Braga spat. "You get crazier all the time."

". . . Why wrangle over it? We'll find his name in his clothes and on the payroll. That's all the proof I want to clear my conscience. How would you clear yours, if anyone had been killed?"

Suddenly Lamerick said, "Pack your duffle and get out. If you want to argue, argue with Hoagland."

Braga regarded him steadily. "What gets into a fellow to go to war against himself?" He went off to a camp car and presently returned with a brown carpetbag and a coat slung over his shoulder. "I'll check out a horse," he said drily. He walked on to the corral.

Lamerick went to the clerical car. "Draw your time at the office in Reserve," he told the clerks. "We'll be hiring again in a week or two."

In the deserted car with its dusty letter-presses and ledgers, he went to work, abstracting everything he needed to block Hoagland from a coup. He inspected the safe. There were only a few hundred dollars on hand.

"We keep the cash in town," he told Craig. "At least I know that much. There's thirty thousand gold in the safe."

"Or was," Callahan said.

Lamerick looked at him, cleared his throat and briskly locked the safe. "We'd better go on. It will be dark before we make it."

They followed the stakes in. The trail following the locations stakes was rough and roundabout. It cut into the high foothills and drifted out again. Finally it sloped into an easy grade a mile short of Reserve. Dusk was over the mountain town like smoke as they rode in. Lights were coming up behind dusty panes, mothers screeched after children and a crew of miners trudged in from one of the closer hardrock mines."

Lamerick looked exhausted. "I'll go to my hotel. Be at the office after dinner."

Callahan and Gentry returned to the

stage station to sluice off trail dirt. After heating water, Gentry began to scrape with a razor. It came to Craig, then, that he had hardly spoken since they flushed the dynamiter. The silence began to disturb him.

"You aren't going to Injun on us, are you?" he asked.

Gentry flicked peppery lather at the wood-box. "I reckon that second slide knocked the stretch out of me. Up to then, you couldn't have given me a railroad. I've put thirty years into proving that any place you could take a horse, you could take a Concord. But all of a sudden it don't matter much whether you can or not. Nobody gives a damn, if there's a smoke-belchin' monster to ride, instead."

Callahan smiled. "That's me talking, Roy, thirty years from now. Somebody

will come along with a transcontinental line of balloons and you'll have to give people either to get them onto a train. But when it happens, I hope somebody trades me balloon stock for railroad stock."

Gentry finished and flipped back the lid of the coffee pot. He said wearily, "And when they do, you'd give the whole kit and bilin' away if you could go back to Colorado and build your first railroad again. That's the way of us, Callahan."

Stanger held a long, supple whip

6

The Return of Captain Stanger

AT eight o'clock they walked up the street to the railroad office. Chips of lamplight escaped through the green blinds. A blunt murmur of voices came through the door. Sizemore, the banker, let them in. He punished a cigar as he stood aside. He was coatless and had loosened his tie. Behind the partition, a large maptable held an untidy exhibit of ledgers, papers and fuming saucers serving as ash-trays. Judge Cady Lightfoot, ominous patriarch of the group, sat at one end of the table with a whiskey bottle at his elbow. His deep-socketed eyes followed the men as they came in.

Leaning against a partition, Marsh Hoagland scratched a match for a half-smoked cigar. His face was sober and deeply-cut with lines, locked in a frown. Through the smoke he regarded Callahan, with slow concentration. The heavy features were dour, but there was no panic in them, and Callahan recalled one of the first things he had learned about the man—that his deceptiveness and sureness increased as the pressure was put on him.

Judge Lightfoot, in his massive baritone, said, "Sit down. Court will come to order."

Callahan took a chair and Sizemore wordlessly offered a cigar. Looking out-of-place, Gentry sat beside Lamerick, but Hoagland stayed on his feet.

"As I understand it," Lightfoot said, "we thought this man was building a railroad, and it turns out we've got something an amusement park wouldn't own

up to. What are we going to do about it?"

"I could tell you," Callahan said, "but I don't expect anybody would want to pull the trigger."

Hoagland drew on the cigar and said nothing.

"The first thing," Sizemore said, "is to vote in a new chief engineer. But we can't do that until tomorrow. We don't have enough votes among us. Hoagland," he said sourly, "maybe you could suggest something."

Hoagland stirred. "Yes. If you want a suggestion."

They waited, not looking at him. But Callahan studied him in a kind of fascination.

Hoagland supported his weight on his elbows, turning the cigar slowly between his fingers. "Would it be asking too much for you to get information from the association of railroads before you fire me?"

"What's that?" Callahan asked. "A club for down-and-out brakemen? I never heard of it."

Lamerick's face had eased. He avoided Callahan's eyes. He said, "I suppose it doesn't have to be decided tonight. Lightfoot, can you draft us a letter to this—whatever it is—and send it under your official seal?"

Callahan was on his feet, staring down at them. "By God, if you old women want to let him tie a can to your tails, why should I worry?"

Sizemore's brows pulled. "What you don't seem to see, Callahan, is that the whole town may stand or fall by what happens to us!"

"I see that!" Callahan snapped.

From the door, Gentry's voice came in puzzled alarm. "What the hell!"

Chairs scraped back. Callahan went out onto the walk beside him. A line of saddle- and pack-horses was breaking up before Emory's Livery Stable. Callahan recognized Captain Stanger's rawhide form swinging out of saddle.

Gentry was whispering. "By God, boys! It had to come. That boarding-house general wa'n't fit to lead an old soldiers' parade!"

Lamerick padlocked the office and they went down. Miners were stringing out of the saloons and cafes. There were six men with Stanger. His tunic was bloodstained. He had lost his hat. One of the other men suddenly grasped at his saddlehorn but missed it and went overside. Two men caught him and laid him on the ground.

The other horses were laden with the remnants of equipment. Stanger looked at the crowd like a man being persecuted. "Utes!" he said. "They attacked in force at Crow Creek. We'd tracked them—same gang that scalped the wood-cutters."

"Where's the rest?" someone asked.

Stanger's jaw was loose. He bent his head and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "Massacred," he said. "Security guard failed us. They hit at dawn. We were lucky, that's all—"

"But the other eight," Gentry said softly, "weren't."

Stanger's head turned. "Is that my fault? Damn it, man, is it my fault if a guard slept?"

A lean trooper gripped his pommel with both hands. "Captain, that ain't so. Corporal Ensley had orders to—"

Stanger turned his horse into the stable. "That will be decided," he said . . .

When Craig and Gentry left the crowd, Hoagland had gone. Lamerick tried to fumble an explanation but Callahan pushed past him and went back to the stage depot.

Sitting over coffee, Callahan told Gentry: "If he'd pulled out a bottle of snakebite cure, they'd have fought each other to buy it. All they want is to be fair. That takes time. And all he wants is time. They'll paper their walls with those

bonds next fall—the damned fools!"

"In fact," Gentry said, "the only thing you like about Hollis Lamerick is his daughter."

After a while Hollis Lamerick came, smelling of the barber-shop. He bore an envelope addressed to the telegraph agent at Bitter Creek. His face craved understanding as he gave Gentry the letter.

"Send this with the mail train," he said. "You can see our position. If it turns out he *is* right about the line being adequate for mountain freight—

"Go to hell," said Callahan.

He went into the yard. A hostler was watering stock. Gentry came out to fork up hay, and at eleven Shawn Miller came to the station with a straw suitcase in her hand.

"Where's the stage?" she asked Callahan.

Callahan gave it back to her for the other day. "Maybe you'd better move to the stage office and keep up with things. There was another slide. Act of God. No stage, Shawn. Not for two weeks."

There was bluish skin under her eyes, and her face was drawn. "Craig, I've got to get away! This town's going crazy!"

"Most of them seem to like it that way."

"Don't joke!" she said. "It was bad enough to see you beaten, and Braga whipped, and hear men planning to burn the stage depot if you didn't stop interfering with the railroad. But when they start to have public whippings!"

At once he knew; but he asked shortly: "Who's whipping who?"

"Stanger . . . He's whipping Ensley, the trooper who's supposed to have caused the massacre. Hoagland was talking him into it last night. He tried him this morning, with himself as judge advocate and defense counsel! They'll whip him in front of Emory's at noon. I don't want to be here, Craig! I can't stay in town and hear it."

She grasped only the surface brutality, but what he saw was the savage terror of a commander who had let eight of his men be slaughtered . . . a numbed seeking after exoneration for himself by throwing the blame on another.

Callahan got his Stetson and told Gentry, "I'm going down to watch the whipping. Trooper Ensley's to be hided in front of Emory's. Better spruce up and come down."

THERE was a narrow aisle down the middle of the street before the livery stable: Men jammed the boardwalks and the street itself. There was much subdued talk, an occasional shame-faced chuckle. He discovered Lamerick and Sizemore back in the margin of onlookers.

There was a reluctant pressing-back. Callahan wedged forward and standing in the front rank got his shoulder against the wall of the building. A timber thrust out above the hay-loft door, like a hang-tree. A man standing on baled hay tossed out the hay-hook and another handler let the rope down through the block.

Captain Stanger appeared. A civilian prodded Corporal Ensley through the door. The man's hands were tied before him and he was bare-headed and sallow.

The crowd went silent. Stanger cleared his throat and unfolded a paper. His hands trembled. His voice clogged as he began to read:

". . . that you shall receive one hundred lashes, and be drummed out of the service." Stanger finished reading. He snapped to attention and said something to the man who had brought the trooper out.

Ensley began to struggle, suddenly, shouting curses at the captain. But a gang of men surrounded him and the rope binding his hands was caught by the hay-hook. They hauled him to his toes. Stanger held a long, supple whip about the fatness and length of a mature king-snake.

"Will you count?" Stanger asked the

hostler. Stark cruelty was in his eyes.

The man nodded. Without warning Stanger's shoulder rolled and the whip went out. Ensley writhed, but did not cry out.

"One!" the hostler counted.

Stanger struck again. His face was turning red. He kept moistening his lips. He struck four times, moving about as Ensley's body turned on the twist of the rope. The corporal's shirt was torn; blood began to stream. Now his back was to Callahan; the whip popped near him as it recoiled.

He looked up again, his mouth hardening. As Stanger threw the whip back, Callahan caught it. He yanked. It was out of the cavalryman's hand.

"You crazy fool!" Stanger shouted.

Callahan moved forward and got his back to the wall. "You don't savvy," he told Stanger. "They just want to see someone whipped. They don't care particularly who. In fact, I think they'll find this an improvement."

He drove the whip at Stanger's face. It struck in a hard coil of plaited leather, smashing his lips and cutting his eye. He want to his knees in agony. In an instant he was struggling up, pulling at his Colt. Callahan slashed at the man's arm. He caught it and yanked; as Stanger stumbled close he struck him across the nose with the butt of the blacksnake. Stanger fell aside, blinded, and Callahan threw his gun in the dirt.

No one moved. Ensley swung on the long rope. The men were utterly quiet. Callahan's boots never stirred, but his upper body pivoted and his shoulder dipped, time after time, without weariness and without pity. Stanger floundered against the door of the stable, half rising, falling again, turning his face to the planks and again facing outward and crying in pain and rage.

Sweat pitted Callahan's face. He was aware of the miracle of the crowd, and knew at last why it was—they were not many men, but one man controllable because they had no stake whatever in this. He had been right: A proxy would do as well as the proper victim.

He cut with the whip until the rage went out of Stanger's voice. He watched the captain fall to the boardwalk and crawl toward the legs of the men ringing him in, hunting shelter. He threw the whip down, then, and, walking to where the rope was tied which held the corporal up, he cut it loose. He gave the man a dollar.

"Buy yourself a couple," he said.

No one attempted to stop him as he departed.

HE WAS in the National for an hour, drinking and lackadaisically betting on roulette and watching the dice tumble in the chuckaluck cages. He was out eighty-five dollars when Roy Gentry found him. Gentry made a couple of bets on roulette, sitting beside Callahan, but he did not speak. Craig could almost hear a wire of nervousness vibrating in him.

Finally Gentry grunted: "Do we have to do this?"

Callahan shrugged and followed him to the bar. A shirt-sleeved barman brought them steam beer, slicing the suds neatly with an ivory knife. Gentry salted his beer and sipped it.

"You and the devil must have cooed in the same bassinette," he growled.

"Stanger's been begging for it. Nobody seemed to think he was being mistreated."

Gentry mused. "Funny thing—Hoagland took off during the show."

"Why shouldn't he? He's got a railroad to build. He's got to be out buying rusty rails and green ties."

"Well, he's heeled for the job. He took everything in the safe and disappeared. Thirty thousand—gold. Lamerick and Sizemore are crazy, but they were

ashamed to come after you. So I came."

Callahan's jaw muscles loosened, and Gentry grinned. "You look interested, after all. The reason I figger Stanger got swindled is that Hoagland ribbed him up to the whipping to bunch everybody in town down here." He finished his beer in four gulping swallows. "Why don't we go back to the station, where we can talk?"

In the cold back office of the stage depot, Lamerick sat with a cigar in his mouth and the sickest face Callahan had ever seen. Callahan breathed deeply. Down through the blood vessels and nerves of his body, he could feel warmth trickling. But he gave the man a lofty scowl and wrestled the tip from a cigar with his teeth.

Lamerick said, "I won't make any more of an ass of myself by apologizing."

"I don't know as you could."

Lamerick's pained face turned up. "Where would he go, Craig?"

"How should I know?"

"But you know him better than we do! My God! I sat in that office all night, with a shotgun, just in case—And I had a man in the place this morning, too. Then we all went down to see the whipping."

He slowly pounded his knees with his palms. "And then I went back. He'd taken all the cash—gold and yellowbacks! And burned the papers. . . . . Where the hell would he go?" he pleaded.

Callahan gazed out the window. "Why ask me? I'm a stage man. Last night my pardner and I tried to be railroad men. You put the big britches on us. I'm going to get some rest," he told Gentry.

He gripped the cold white knob, but the railroad man strode after him. "Listen, Callahan! It was reasonable enough, what he said. But I didn't entirely believe him. that's why I guarded the office. I wanted to be sure. We'll listen to you, now. I talked to Lightfoot and Sizemore, and they'll back you for superintendent. But without that money, we're whipped! We're already overextended."

Callahan considered . . . "The way he worked before, he had bank deposits all over the state of Kansas. I saw a batch of passbooks in his desk once. Now, if you could find the pass-books, you'd be able to track him down, sooner or later. Maybe."

"Yes, but what about taking after him now? It's only been two or three hours.

"That's a long time, as fast as he moves."

He opened the door, and Lamerick was silent, his eyes bitter. Callahan hesitated.

"Will you put that all in writing?"

Lamerick had a paper in his pocket. "Done!"

Callahan looked at it. He began to rub his hands. "Roy, get a horse out. Fastest thing in the yard."

Lamerick trailed him as he paced into his bedroom. "You can only ride one direction at once. God knows where he's gone."

"But a good bet would be he went back to end-of-track. He'd probably go by the route they've staked out. He wouldn't want to show himself in our camp, and he'd have to, to get by it. I'd expect him to have the rest of his cash hidden around the railroad, probably in his bunk or office."

"That's a lot of guessing," Lamerick said dubiously.

"Yes. But don't forget railroads are faster than horses, and once he makes it there he can beat us into Bitter Creek by six hours." He stood there with his carbine in his hands, a smile faintly turning his lips. "It's been a long pull, Lamerick. But I've finally got him on the short end of the rope."

Gentry had saddled one horse and was throwing a blanket on another when Callahan ran out with a booted gun and some food rolled in a blanket. Tying it behind the cantle, he told Gentry hurriedly, "I'm

going like hell, Roy. I'm picking off the best plug at each station, but if you want to try to keep up—"

"You're following the stage road then?"

"How else? He'll be halfway back to camp by that goatpath he's charted. But the stage road is a shortcut to the Bridge Creek crossing."

"That's twenty mile beyond the slide!" Gentry's face began to burn. "Listen! You want to get there first and be waitin' on him?"

"All I ask is a chance to dive at the caboose."

"Then, by God, what you want is a stagecoach! Stagecoach will outrun a hoss any time. Hosses to Long Valley . . . stagecoach from there. And by God I'll drive her myself!"

Callahan swung up, grinning. "Stage outrun a horse?"

"You think it won't? It'll damn well outrun a coal-burner, this trip."

THERE was only one relay between Reserve and the slide. They abandoned their blown horses here and took off on new mounts. Callahan's eye measured the sun as they slanted up the side of Cougar Mountain. Darkness would whip them, for at night a stage, or even a horse, could not make the time that a locomotive could. It would be a race with sundown.

They descended a vague deer-trail to avoid the slide. Following a deep canyon, they came out in mid-afternoon on the green apron of Long Valley. From the foothills, they could see the stage station, a derelict city of stranded freight outfits.

Gentry began to stew. "If that mail coach ain't come down today, they'll be fur flyin'!"

As they loped in, they saw the dusty olive green coach in the yard, its tongue resting on the ground. Gentry's heels thumped the ground. "Hitch 'em!" he bawled. "Give me a team damn' it!"

Hostlers began to assemble. The station keeper stood on the porch and argued with him.

"Roy, it ain't begun to be cleared! You couldn't take a dog-sled over that-there slide."

"Ain't going that direction!"

Gentry rawhided the hostlers into the corral and took charge of the cutting-out. Callahan stood in the yard and looked for someone, and presently she came to the door. Seeing him, her face gladdened. Callahan caught her by the waist.

"Craig, what's happened? I've been out of my head, waiting— We heard a man was killed at the railroad camp, but nobody seemed to know who."

Callahan smiled. "It's been a quiet weekend," he said. "Not much doing at all. But they took a vote this morning and decided to let me build the road instead of Marsh Hoagland. We're trying to catch Hoagland now to tell him."

"That's only part of it," she said suspiciously. "What's the rest?"

"The rest is he's got all the company cash with him. There won't be a road if we don't stop him. So what I was going to say to you will have to wait till I get back."

She gathered up her skirts with a quick motion and half-turned. "I'm going along."

Callahan turned her back. "You're staying here. Coaches turn over. Utes light fires in roads." He saw Gentry and the hostlers backing the team onto the pole. "If you want to help, just pray that for once a stagecoach outruns a train."

From the station house, the agent ran with a long-barreled rifle and a coat over his arm. Gentry waved him back. "Can't take you, Harry! These nags are going to need every break we can give them."

"You can't stop a train!" Kitty told Craig. What will you do—flag him down? Light a flare?"

"That's what I'll be thinking about between here and Bridge Creek," he told her. "And something else I'll be thinking about is this—"

It was less hurried than the other day, lingering with a poignant sweetness. Her body was supple and strong against him, and he felt her fingers holding him, and then he heard the coach-tires grind back and forth and knew the team was ready. But she held him an instant longer, whispering:

"If I had to choose between you and the railroad, you know which it would be. So if you're in doubt about anything, think about me."

"Even when I'm not in doubt," Craig said.

Gentry was shouting at him as he bulled the team around toward the road. He held it long enough for him to put a foot on the hub and swing up. The stage ground out of the yard and onto the road spearing across the valley into the hills.

AFTER a while Callahan realized the sun was full on the side of his face. It was deep in the west. On the rises, he searched for train-smoke in the broken hills beyond the sage. He sat there with his coat collar turned up and one hand gripping the cold iron rail, praying to and scorning the gods of staging whom Gentry worshipped. The road was winding lunacy—hugging the land as though terrified of being separated from it for an instant. A gully would knock the bottom out of the road, the horses would stream through it and the Concord would hit bedrock with a lunge. Then rocks would rise from the range before them and they would twist and dodge like an old cow in a brush pasture.

Once Gentry precipitately tromped the brake and handed the team in. Doggedly staring ahead, he said, "Even a hoss is only human. Got to rest 'em."

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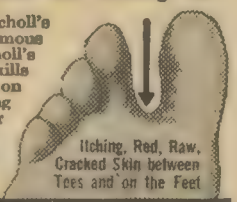

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"How far to the relay?"

"Three mile. Then Bridge Creek. Another four, say."

A feather of sound drifted down-wind. Their eyes touched brittlely. "That's it!" said Callahan. "He's got his steam."

"How much time can he make?"

"On those rails, cream would sour in ten minutes. Not over tweny-five or thirty miles an hour."

Gentry seemed to sag. "Twenty-five!"

He had never, Callahan knew, travelled faster than fifteen, and that with a fast team on a good road. It was a sad end for a proud stageman, racing a work-engine on jerry-laid rails, and making less than half its time . . .

"Well, damn, we ain't going to beat his time a-settin' here!" said Gentry. He kicked the brake off the notch.

They bucked through a narrow pass where sage scratched the panels and crackled under the wheels, and a few minutes later Gentry ordered, "Grub out that horn in the boot and blow your lungs out."

Raising the battered bugle from under the seat, Callahan blew a squawking call. When they smoked into the stage-yard a few moments later, the team was already half-hitched. This was a small, one-man swing station, and Callahan helped with the horses. As Gentry ascended the box, he drew both carbines from the boots and cocked them. Sitting there, then, he heard a distant stutter of steam-valves. The station keeper grinned up at them, not understanding.

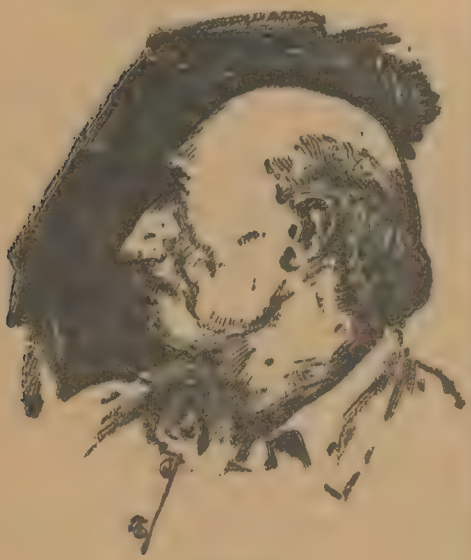
"Watch out for trains, Roy! You and that work-train are about to run a dead-heat to the crossin'!"

The stage rattled out of the yard. They were on a tilted prairie of lavender sage. In a clear amber sky, the sun was sagging behind the hills. Darkness would come swiftly, but it was only another fifteen minutes to the crossing, now.

Gentry's arms extended straight out over the dusty, clattering void between foot-board and horses. He had freed the horses: They were in a runaway. Dust boiled around them and smoked in their passage. Callahan tried to recall the explan of the crossing.

Bridge Creek was a sandy, shallow stream in a gully only twenty feet deep, screened with sage and an occasional grove of aspen. A hundred feet south of the stream, the stage-road crossed the tracks before jumping the gully on a short trestle. He thought of all the ways to stop a train: Burn the bridge—no time for that. Dynamite it—no dynamite. Block the tracks . . .

Gentry was weighing the same thing.



Gentry

"Train got any vital parts, like other pests?" he asked.

"Just the engineer, and engineers can duck or be missed!"

"Then we got to block the road. He'd be hell-and-gone ahead of us by the time we made Bitter Creek. He'd be on the night mail and headin' for California."

"What would we block it with?"

Callahan already knew. But he would

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not be the man to suggest it. Gentry knew, too. He spat and shook his head, and would not voice it. They lunged on.

THE noise of the train was a steady pound, now. A horse turned its head to stare toward the foothills. They came up onto a plateau and saw the crossing a quarter-mile ahead of them. Rails gleamed on a spindly trestle. Bridge Creek was traceable only by its sentinel trees. Callahan looked for rocks—not too large, not too small. He looked for logs. And he knew even then that there was only one way to do it.

Gentry was bringing the bits into the wheelers' mouths, then into the swings', the leaders'. He had the horses in the breeching, fighting against him. They were coming into a tossing trot as they approached the tracks in their ruts of tired planks.

"Ready?" Gentry yelled. He looked around to measure; the train was perfectly visible, black and ugly, with spark-flecked smoke streaming on its own wind as it curved through the sagebrush toward them.

"Ready for what?" Callahan shouted.

"To unhitch 'em! Unlatch the tugs on your side. Then git!"

Right to the last, the team resisted him, as if their own instinct was against the sacrilege. They danced across the tracks and he stopped them six feet beyond, the rails passing between the fore and rear wheels. He stood on the long brake-lever to set them, and then jumped down, lugging his carbine.

Callahan's knife slashed the tugs free. He heard Gentry swearing as he undid the snaps. Gentry said, "God forgive me!" and fell back into the brush. The team bolted. Callahan felt the hammer of drivers in the earth. He heard the brakes go on with a scream. Then there was a crack of rifle-fire and he fell in the brush and

lay quiet, watching for the coming move.

With brakes full on, the locomotive, pulling a single car—Hoagland's office—struck the stage. An incredible noise arose; an astonishing amount of junk flew. A wheel was bounding through the brush. Wood, leather, canvas, metal, filled the air. But the tough body of the coach was rolling and slewing along before the train, onto the bridge.

Something happened to the engine's dolly. It was on the ties, thumping with wild rhythm. The train tilted, recovered, and then the blunt cow-catcher dug into the ties of the bridge and began to plow . . .

Callahan, running forward, saw the red office-car fall twenty feet and land in the stream. The locomotive stopped crosswise on the bridge; it did not fall.

Callahan fell behind a stump near the bank. He could see the broken car, its windows shattered and its trucks flung aside. There was no indication of life in it, and he peered at the engine. A head came over the sill of a window. He fired, and heard Gentry's .44 carbine bellow. The face was that of Tom Braga, his bandage still showing. Braga sank back. The slugs tore at the wooden tongue-and-groove siding beneath the window. They chewed it to white splinters, and Braga rose up with blood on him and tried to lean on the sill by one hand, raising a revolver with the other. But the gun dropped into the creek. He fell against the side of the cab and twisted, and finally fell down the steps and onto the trestle.

There was life in the office car, suddenly. Someone on the broken front platform rested a gun barrel on the brake-wheel and fired a quick shot up at Callahan. He heard the sage crackle beside him. Then he watched Marsh Hoagland stand up on the platform and plug another shell into the gun. Hoagland was erect and to the last appeared to command the situation. But he had lost: He could not

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miss it, Callahan realized. He had been whipped by a stage and six horses. He stood with a bloody face in the bottom of a gully, with escape cut off, with nothing left for him but death.

Callahan rose up. "Give up, Marsh," he called. "You haven't a show of making it."

Hoagland patiently finished loading and raised the gun, but Callahan's carbine rocked then, spitting a smut of black powder and a ball of molded lead. Hoagland dropped the gun and lurched backward. He was out of their vision. But a boot lay in sight, moving slowly.

THE bank books were in the safe. There was forty-six thousand dollars in various savings accounts throughout the Territory of Colorado. The gold was in his money belt and there was a suitcase full of gilt-edged bonds. He had been a frugal man, Marsh Hoagland, except with other people's money.

They dragged blankets from the car and holed up in the brush for the night, mindful of Indians. They lay there thinking of their loves. Gentry voiced his with gentle remembrance.

"She held together, Craig! They hit her full power, but she held. There ain't a nail, nor hardly a screw, in a good stagecoach. Dove-tails and glue! That's the ticket. Pitched that en-jine right on its rump in the gully! It was worth losing the coach to see it."

You're getting along, old timer, thought Callahan. A man who could think of anything but women at a time like this was no child.

"There'll be stages in this country as long as we're around," he said. "Rails to the outfitting points, stages to where things are happening. We may find stages are the best part of our business yet! The cream!"

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For years we have given away new cars as a bonus over and above big cash earnings. For saleswomen who prefer them, we offer beautiful $500 Fur Coats as extra bonuses. The easiest way you ever heard of to get a new car or fur coat without paying out a single penny for it. Retail Value including Federal Excise Tax, $500.00

Hosiery for Your Own Use
...sent with Money Making Outfit

Whether you devote only SPARE TIME or give your FULL TIME to this work, it is easy for Wilknit Salespeople to get orders. Selling Wilknit Nylons is not like selling anything you ever sold before. Wilknit Nylons are covered by the most amazing guarantee your customers have ever heard. Your customers can wear out their hose. They can develop runs. They can even snag and rip them. ***No matter what happens to make Wilknit Nylons unwearable...within NINE MONTHS...depending on quantity ...we replace them free of charge under the terms of our sensational guarantee!***

No wonder women are anxious to buy Wilknit! No wonder it is easy to quickly build up a worthwhile future with STEADY year around income! EARNINGS START IMMEDIATELY— and many Wilknit Salespeople report bigger weekly earnings just in SPARE TIME than many men make in a week of full time work!

LOOK AT THESE EXCEPTIONAL EARNINGS FOR SPARE AND FULL TIME

May McPherson, of Pittsburgh, Pa. never sold before. Gets a car as a bonus—*in addition to her earnings*—in less than 196 days. F. M. Sachs, New York, gets new car in 2 months. Mrs. Robert Franklin started out with me and made $56.00 the very first week. Mr. Codman of Rhode Island did even better. His first week's earnings amounted to $69.37. Mrs. Pete Dickson of Ohio made $81.32 her first week out and H. DeLaRoche of Calif. made $68.84 for his first week's earnings. Space permits mentioning only these few exceptional cases—but they give you an idea of the BIG MONEY that is possible in this business in the VERY FIRST WEEK!

Get FACTS Quick

You can carry a wide selection of newest shades, sizes, lengths, and gauges in genuine Nylon. You carry socks for men and hose for children, too. If you are looking for a business that you can call your own—a business that has a prospect in every home or office—a prospect in every last man and woman REGULARLY year in and year out—a business where it's easy to earn extra bonuses—your choice of NEW CAR or FUR COAT—*plus* your big daily profits, then let me hear from you quick.

FACTS FREE! SEND NO MONEY JUST SEND NAME

When you send for Selling Outfit, I send your choice of Nylons or Socks for your personal use. Rush your name for facts about this sensational line of guaranteed hosiery for men, women and children. BE FIRST in your locality. Mail coupon or a penny postcard now. *L. Lowell Wilkin*

"Thanks for the New Ford

in addition to that, my commissions for 2 months amounted to $1,007.60."

"I am happy to have won the car in two months. My commission for two months totaled $1,007.60. I have earned as much as $50 a day and $30 a day commissions have not been unusual. It is a high privilege to represent Wilknit Hosiery Co."

Frank C. Schulz

SEND NAME AND HOSE SIZE

L. LOWELL WILKIN
WILKNIT HOSIERY CO., Inc., 439 Midway, GREENFIELD, OHIO

Please rush all facts about your guaranteed hosiery, money making plan and Bonus offer of Free Car or Fur Coat. Everything you send me now is FREE.

*My Hose Size is*_____

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ Zone___ STATE_____

WILKNIT HOSIERY CO., INC., 439 Midway, Greenfield, Ohio

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